**Just Fear**

**Joseph Martin**

Smashwords Edition

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Intro

JUST FEAR

(A Collection of Short Stories)

By

Joseph Martin

Dedicated to

Dad

Mum

Cedric

Alan

Gopi

My grateful thanks to

Sweety, Sam, Savio, Charvi, Varsha, Vicky, Nilesh, Ajay, Munna, Prashant, Mitesh, Tikoo, Aakash, Aagam, Everest and Aureen ma’am.

Author’s Note

These stories that I have written are fictitious. But every story, believe me, has some iota of truth. For instance, the theory of Reversal of Gene Sequence in the story, ‘The Behemoth’. It had been put forward by a few scientists, which the scientific world rejected. Recently, the theory was once again fielded and accepted. It is now being once again looked into. Even the aircraft—the V-22 Tiltrotor is a US aircraft soon to be made functional for military, naval and civilian purposes.

Structures with similar history and architecture, such as the Chaudari Haveli of ‘Marketing Murders’, in Madhya Pradesh decades ago, and Tahali Khandar, a Fort in the Konkan coast do exist.

The characters of ‘The Crazy Devdas’, ‘The Moken Prophecy’ and ‘Hell Hole in Kravchuk Dacha’ are also inspired from true incidents that recently appeared in a nation’s leading newspaper.

Finally, the story, ‘Code Among the Apaches’ deals with the Apache—the Native American Indians. They were fearless and freedom-loving warriors, who lived with a strict-code of life and death. All the facts mentioned here are true.

Guys, I have been an ardent reader. And I love reading books of substance. So even in my stories, I have written to the point without beating around the bush. So do read these stories and send me the feedback on joseph@josephmartin.in. Any kind of feedback is welcome! It does not matter what you have to say-good or bad! So just read it and enjoy! Happy reading!

DESOLATE DARE

1. Desolate Dare - The Ominous Eavesdropping

“Salim was bitten on his neck last week…” Uncle Chandra was on his mobile. The grimness in his voice chilled me rather than the words. I froze. I could not move on without hearing his further conversation. So I crept towards the slightly ajar door and listened. I’m not a nose-poker, but today I could not help being one.

We are an average family. Not orthodox nor too liberal, and my uncle was a no-nonsense guy. He would never take my interference lightly. Though I was nearing twenty, he still treated me like a twelve-year-old. The old coot did not know I had already gone through a dozen of hookahs, cigarettes, even tequila and weed! Ah! And there was also Gignasha aka Gina my GF, a year senior to me. She was no Kim Kardashian but definitely a hottie. Nobody called her Gignasha, it was too pedestrian! Just as everyone called me Andy. (In school, I was known as *Andaa*— EggHead. Not now though!)

But who could tell him! He would never understand! The old school of thought! If he even got the slightest clue, he’d kick ass hard!

But his further talk caused bloody goose bumps.

“Salim had gone to the Tahali Khandar and now he is dead.” Uncle continued. “Girish too had accompanied him. He is lucky to be alive… but is suffering from bouts of fright fevers.”

Girish is my village childhood friend. Something in the Tahali Khandar had terrified him. He developed fever due to acute fear. Tahali Khandar was a ruin in my village. It was rumored to be the haunt of an ancient *chudail*—witch and her horde of blood-thirsty *narpishach*—ghouls.

Could this be the cause? Could they have bitten Salim? No, I told myself; I was letting my imagination run amok. It was absurd to even think this pure crap! Some rabid wild animal probably bit Salim. But how? Who? My village was a remote island cut off from the mainland and the British had wiped off most of the predators decades ago. As they had planned to build a secret naval base that never materialized.

I did not have time for such bullshit! My hottie angel was waiting for me. But what followed next was chilling.

“The poor boy’s trembling after dark, night after night, was pitiful. This lasted for nearly a week. By the end of the week, he died.”

Salim? Trembling in fear? Dead? *Unbelievable!* He was a true daredevil and had guts of steel. Once he had ventured into the mangroves beside the Tahali Khandar in the dead of night, to prove there were no ghouls. And now, those very non-existent ghouls had tried to devour him!

As I stood listening, I heard footsteps behind me. It was time to move away. But the last sentence convinced me.

Again, uncle was speaking. “I am going to organize volunteers from the village and venture into the Tahali Khandar to find their lair and eliminate them. We have endured them for too long...”

I hurried away before I could be caught.

Uncle Chandra is my foster uncle. My dad, Arjun Gaikwad, and he, as kids, were inseparable. When I was a year old, dad and uncle had gone on a trek into Tahali Khandar. A fatal accident there injured uncle and brought dad a slow death. This is all I got to know, Chandra. The old coot always tactfully evaded the issue.

*Why?* Also, on certain days Chandru would be uptight, especially on my birthdays. *Why the hell?* *Was he hiding skeletons in his cupboard?*

Anyway, Dad knew his end was imminent, so he instructed his lawyer, Yash, to declare Chandru the custodian of our village property until I turned twenty-one. *Really wonder why this didn’t happen on my eighteenth birthday!* But who could question the old coot. Uncle brought me to his city house when I was seven, where I live to date.

These days, Uncle seemed relieved on two counts. First, I would be going to the village after ten-odd years. Also, my property I would be transferred on my name. I would turn twenty-one next month. My property, he declared, was a heavy burden. *My foot!*

Uncle’s words lurked in my mind. I went to my room and pondered over the hush-hush telephonic conversation.

*Chandru was going to the witch’s lair? To kill the vampires?* Shucks, too shitty stuff! Such witch and werewolf hunts were only in movies. A mob of villagers would assemble with fire torches, pitchforks, scythes, swords and whatnot, to hunt these evil creatures.

I could not get the thought out of my head. I have a thing for ruins, historical places and the occult. It is the only thing that separated me from my friends.

2. Desolate Dare - Tahali Khandar’s Gory Past

Later that day, I found uncle reading a newspaper in his favorite chair. “Uncle, what time are we leaving for Velugar tomorrow?” I inquired, to strike a conversation.

I detested going to the village. That horrible well-water for drinking, no air-condition, eating and drinking from steel vessels…Ugh, it was worse than a labor camp! But I had to receive my inheritance; it amounted to a few 1000Ks.

Without putting down the newspaper, he answered casually, “Not *we.* I will be leaving tomorrow. As I have to attend to some urgent matter before you reach the village. You can join me later.”

“Ah! Our good old village!” I said, trying to sound pleased. My friends, especially Gina, had drilled it in me to pretend that I was pleased to go. Uncle would be happy, she reasoned. “I shall meet Girish again.” I added on second thoughts deliberately to rake up Girish’s story. The telephonic conversation was always on my mind. “By the way, how is he?” I probed further.

Uncle now put down the paper, without batting an eyelid, he answered, “Okay.”

*What a load of crap* Chandru was giving me. “And Salim?” I persisted.

 At these words, he looked straight at me. In a low voice, he said, “Okay.”

I was adamant, so I asked, “Uncle, tell me why so glum? Upset about something?”

“OK, fine,” he sighed, “if you must know, I just got a call from Yash, your lawyer, that your property papers are missing! None can claim authority over your property until it’s found. Not even you.”

*No property!* My face fell. He immediately said, “Relax boy, it’s just a matter of days and everything will be okay.”

I felt the lump in my throat dissolve. I was back to my interrogation. “Uncle, at least tell me now, what happened on that fateful night at the Khandar?”

He glared at me, gritted his teeth and thundered, “Anish Gaikwad, you meddlesome swine! You want to poke your nose everywhere! How many times have I told you not to ask about it! ” With these words, he stormed out of the room.

His outburst was justified. Maybe he felt responsible for dad’s death. Besides, people, knowing Chandru’s risky nature, blamed him for the accident.

I strongly felt that the mishaps of dad, Girish, and Salim were linked to some mystery in the Khandar, unknown to me!

Without even saying a bloody goodbye, he left for the village the next day. *Good riddance! Who cares!*

A few days before *Durga Pooja*, I left for my village. Gina and a few friends came to see me off. They tugged at my traditional *kurta* passing down-market comments. *Bitches!* I have never dressed traditionally, but always in branded clothes. I was forced to dress so, for these idiotic villagers stared, as if you had landed from Pluto.

Gina often told me that she was attracted to my Matt Damonish looks. She was not the first girl to say so.

The bus ride from Pune to Velugar was a five-hour journey. The AC bus was comfy, but the popular Bollywood movie playing was boring, at least to me. It was supposed to be hilarious; all my fellow-commuters were laughing uncontrollably. But hard as I tried, I could barely get a smile from the movie.

I wished they had played a real Hollywood classic, something like *Inception, Bourne Ultimatum or maybe even Matrix Reloaded…* But I am sure my ‘half-brained fellow-commuters’ would be like cavemen watching an automobile!

Irritated, I got out my Blackberry; it had been my piece for the last six months. I now yearned for an iPhone-4, but uncle would have nothing to do with it.

I promised myself, with my inheritance, I would buy the best piece in the market. Probably an iPhone-4S from Apple. It had an A5 chip that made it twice faster than the iPhone-4 and also a dual-core with several times better graphics. But for now, I put on my earplugs and listened to sexy Rihanna sing…*Cheers drink to that...*

Soon listening to it made me thirsty. I got out my pineapple Bacardi and made short work of it.

My village, Velugar is a small fishing village on the Konkan coast; close to the state of Goa. In fact, it was a part of Goa until the state of Maharashtra came into existence. I had heard some place that I come from a royal lineage. My great-great-grandfather was a *jaghirdar*—a kind of small regional prince. And his estate included the entire village of present day Velugar. While old Chandru’s lineage came from foot soldiers of my estate.

Tahali Khandar is an ancient ruin on the far side of our village. It was one of the many lesser known sea-forts built by the Marathas as early as the 18th century. Later, it was taken over by the Siddhis. Around 1840, the British conquered it and it remained in their possession until independence.

It had a gory and infamous history. The fort had witnessed a lot of bloodshed during the 1857 revolt. Hundreds of Indians were killed. Their corpses were thrown in the sea adjoining the fort to rot. Thereafter, the villagers claimed to have seen the spirits of the slaughtered ones.

I seriously believed all of it was crap. All forts witness bloodshed, of course they have to…They are built for offense and defense. So, does it mean all forts are haunted? What about those forts which are well-maintained and visited by tourist? Why are such forts not haunted by spirits and ghosts?

Tahali was a *Khandar*—ruins, because the Indian Archeological Society had ignored it. Or probably was clueless of its existence.

The bus crossed into Velugar and though it was four in the evening; it appeared dark. Rain clouds loomed over the village. It was really crappy weather. When would I finish with this God-forsaken place? Soon our bus passed by Tahali Khandar. A strange excitement filled me. The place bore a dark, desolate look. *What really existed in the damned place?*

3. Desolate Dare - The Witch Lady

The bus drove through the village and entered the depot. I stepped off the bus with a kind of trepidation. Old coot’s twenty-two year old son, Vishy and their servant, Mohan-the Schmuck, had come to receive me. I was a pro at nicknaming others. And boy, I excelled in it!

Looney Vishy was a nerdy guy. He was tall, scrawny and wore tacky clothes. He wore his hair like a jerk and was ever-aloof. Saying a quick hi-and-bye, he left the place hurriedly. Vishy, had always been like this. He never interacted with me. Uncle had probably sent him to learn some panache from me. He was not a bit like uncle. I seriously wonder if he is really Junior Chandru or a bastard! A stupid foot soldier indeed!

Mohan was a schmuck, a guy about my age. He had a retarded look about him. He was dark, short, and his hair was like twisted pieces of wire, like the aborigines of Australia. His favorite topics were spirits and witches. Besides, he was to be my Man-Friday for the next few days, so it was necessary to be polite. That meant yakitity-yak with him.

The schmuck told me that Looney Vishy had always been a recluse. He was uninterested in worldly affairs, which was a pain in the arse to his father. Uncle was busy with the village festive preparations. Aunt was busy at home. It did not matter; I had Tahali Khandar on my mind.

Just as my luggage was unloaded, the skies opened in torrents. Crap, it was just the luck I needed!

We took shelter in the depot and chatted. But I had certain questions on my mind. And Schmucky was the best to answer them.

I asked him, “How are Girish and Salim?”

“Fine. Anish *baba*.” he answered.

Anish *baba?* How low society it sounded. But what else can you expect from a schmuck! I did not care a crap what he called me. I just wanted my property, sell it and boogie out of this village of a shit-hole!

“Are you sure?” I persisted.

“Yes, Anish *baba*, only, I haven’t seen them for a while.”

*Why were they all lying?* *Bloody liars!* I soon veered the conversation to Tahali Khandar. I wanted to know everything about that damn place. Mohan, I knew, had a penchant for it. So, I decided to milk him some more about the place. Once again, I asked, “Are you sure there is nothing about Girish, Salim and the Khandar?”

He grew solemn and said, “Yeah, they were attacked by the *chudail*. And now they have become vampires.”

I stared open-mouthed at him. My heart did a double flip. Was it possible? For a moment, I did not move. What the fuck!

The stupid look on my face was too much for him. He burst out laughing uncontrollably.

I grew red-faced and glowered at him. Just then, I noticed an old hag staring at me.

She locked me with a steady, wild look, which was unnerving. I looked away, but moments later my sights were back on her. Her wild, steady look had not left me.

She appeared to be poor. Time and poverty had aged her. Her face was bony; her hair was salt and pepper colored. But what stood out in her bony face were her stoic eyes. They were sinister; snake’s eyes. And hadn’t left me. She was not a person to encounter on a dark night. I was getting spooked.

Mohan must have noticed it, for he turned to where my sight was.

“Anish *baba!*,” he whispered urgently. “Don’t look at her! She is evil! She is Maltibai, the witch! Everyone believes she is mad, but she is a worshipper of witches…”

My gaze could not shift from her. It hypnotized me.

Mohan grasped my arm and turned me around, “Anish *baba*, we have to go!”

Lifting my luggage, he guided me through the depot. “What were you doing, baba?” he scolded me. “You can easily fall prey to that witch. She always roams near the Tahali Khandar. Never, ever look or speak to her. Come, let’s go. The rain has lessened.”

As I reached the depot’s end, I could not help looking back. She was still staring at me. Suddenly, she raised a bony finger and beckoned me to her.

The hair on my neck stood. I turned away and followed Mohan as quickly as I could. *What other weirdoes were in wait for me?*

4. Desolate Dare - The Unholy Visit

Tonight, I somehow sensed, it would be an unsavory night. Mohan’s warning was the all that reverberated in my ears. *Anish baba, please close the windows at night!*

Yet, I had ignored his warning and left the window open. I hated to be told what I should do and what not. But as it grew late, an uncanny feeling that I was being watched hung over me like a dark shadow. Outside, the silence was overpowering. There was the constant sound of crickets and the occasional croaking of frogs. Far in the distance, the breaking of the ocean’s surf was audible. Occasionally, a gentle wind lifted the window curtain, exposing the darkness outside. The saline sea smell was strong.

I could not sleep till I met uncle, he was working late. I was all eager to know about my inheritance. Had the old man found the missing papers? If not, then what would be my fate?

The niggling thought that the *trusted* lawyer, Yash, was up to old tricks did occur. But my uncle had always advocated for him. He wouldn’t stoop to this level.

I put on my Blackberry, but it was to no avail. The thought that I was being watched was nagging me. I arose from my cot and looked out of the window. My room was on the ground floor. It opened out to the countryside.

Outside, the night was silent; a fine mist was blowing in from the sea. Not far from my window was a small lake. On its bank stood an enormous banyan tree. Mohan had told me it was the village swimming pool! Aha! But a few months earlier, a young couple had committed suicide in it. Since then, it was alleged that the place was haunted by the couple.

Villagers avoided the place after noontime and sunset. Yet, for some unknown reason, I watched the eerie scenario. The banyan tree stood there with its scraggy branches spreading out in all directions. A shallow blanket of mist hung over the inky black waters at its foot. It made the hair on my neck stand.

Anyone with proper sense would shut the windows and cocoon themselves inside. But I was just too much bull-headed to do so. I wondered what I was trying to prove. And to whom? Yet I stood before the window and willed the dead couple to show themselves.

My vigil was broken by a knocking on my door. “Who is it?” I asked.

“It’s me Anish *baba*.” I heard the schmuck call. I hurried to open the door, relieved to be distracted from my eerie vigil.

Mohan had brought a mosquito repellent. “*Baba,* is everything alright?” he asked, glancing at me.

“Everything’s fine.” I lied to him, accepting the ointment.

His inquisitive eyes did a quick recce of my room. It stopped at the open windows.

“Anish *baba!* You are brave to keep the windows open!”

*I wasn’t sure if it was genuine admiration or was he being cheeky?* Brushing me aside, he entered. Such intrusion would make me explode, but tonight even the schmuck was welcome. Yet my temperament kicked in. “Don’t close the windows!” I ordered, as he stretched out to close them.

He stopped and turned around. Just for a moment, I detected a flicker of triumph on his face, and then he was back to his childish protesting. “Anish *baba,* did not I warn you of the dead couple…”

“Mohan…” I interrupted firmly. “There are no ghosts! All this is bull crap!”

He looked at me as if I was a dunce. I knew I had stepped on a raw nerve. He was a staunch believer in the supernatural. Anything against it, he was sure to pick up cudgels. It was the only way to stall him. I wanted him to keep me company; the night was getting eerier by the minute.

He settled below the window on a mat facing me. I sat on a low charpoy. He was back to his favorite topic - the occult. Anything to humor him and keep me company in this infernal silence.

“One night, two villagers were returning home,” Mohan began. “While passing the Tahali Khandar, they saw a beautiful maiden. She was weeping. They stopped to help her. She told them she had lost her son inside the Khandar and could not find him. She requested them to help her find him.”

*What a bucket load of crap!* I knew the rest of the story: one of them noticed something abnormal about her feet. They were twisted backwards. Ghosts are supposed to have twisted feet. But I let him continue the story. It was amusing.

He finished the story and sat in silence, waiting for my reaction.

When he got none, he spoke in a hurt voice, “I know you don’t believe me. But I am telling you, Anish *baba,* there are witches and ghouls in the Khandar…”

I lay on my charpoy, trying not to dwell on the story. But my sight kept going to the curtained window opposite me. A gentle breeze blew the curtain slightly. For a second, at a glance, I saw a pair of eyes watching me. Then they were gone. I stiffened. *Was it my imagination or was I being watched?*

I kept silent. I didn’t want to end up as a *schmuck* before the schmuck.

I lay back again, this time, my eyes fixed on the window. I waited for the breeze to shift the curtain.

It did, but no eyes stared from beyond. I did not know whether felt relief or fear. Yet my eyes stayed at the window. What the bloody hell!

“Anish *baba*,” Mohan said. “What if I take you to a man who actually knows a witch?”

I was not hearing him; my sight was on the window. Goose pimples erupted all over my skin.

*The pair of eyes appeared outside the window!*

It stayed long enough for me to realize I was not imagining. Then it disappeared.

It was exactly like the one I had seen at the bus depot. I could not forget those terrible eyes in a hurry. Damn witch!

“Mohan, I think someone is outside the window.” I whispered from the corner of my mouth.

The transformation of Mohan was a sight to see. He turned pale and his jaw hung in disbelief.

Suddenly, he lunged away from the window to my side.

I knew I could not count on him. I was alone. “Who the fuck is there?” I called.

Only a mild breeze and silence greeted me.

I arose and moved towards the window.

“Please, Anish *baba*,” he literally begged. “Don’t talk to them. Don’t even look at them.”

*Screw you!* I wanted to tell him. But I saw this as my chance to show bravado. Damn! Whatever it was, was outside. Besides, the window was iron barred. Mustering all my courage, I moved closer and called again. “Come out whoever you are; or I will screw you so bad, you will not want to come back…”

Again, silence. I grew confident. Was it a burglar just doing a recce of the place? Had I frightened him?

*Kudos Anish,* I congratulated myself. I turned and saw Mohan sitting huddled, staring at the window. Feebly, he pointed towards it.

I turned. *The pair of eyes were again at the window!*

Before I could think of anything, an arm thrust in and tried to grab me. “What the faaaacck!” I yelled as I stumbled backwards, falling on Mohan.

We watched in horror as the arm withdrew and a voice called from outside, “My, my, my, somebody is certainly jumpy.”

“Uncle Chandra!” I called with a deep sense of relief. The curtain was drawn aside. I saw the laughing face of uncle.

“You scared us to death!” I complained. My relief was turning to anger. I was ready to kick Chandru’s keister.

“You deserve it. Don’t you have anything else but spirits and Tahali Khandar?” he reprimanded me. “I have been standing here for the last few minutes to surprise you, and all I hear is that rubbish. So, I wanted to show you every occurrence has a valid explanation…”

“That wasn’t funny!” I was fuming when he entered the room.

“You care a damn! Anish, this is the last time I will repeat myself. There are no witches, vampires, or evil spirits. Do you understand? And no more talk of the Tahali Khandar. One death...” and he abruptly stopped.

Why was Uncle so fucking determined to keep me away from the Tahali Khandar?

“But…but uncle one death …” I repeated, trying to corner him.

“But what Anish? Are you a retard or just stupid? I don’t want any discussion on this matter. Now go to sleep. Tomorrow, I have a long day.” With that, he strode out of the room. Trust uncle to quickly change the topic.

Before he could step out, the curtain shifted slightly.

*A pair of kohl-lined eyes was watching me!* That damned witch-woman, Maltibai!

“Crap...Bitch!” A cry erupted from my throat. Uncle was back in a jiffy. He and Mohan were looking wildly at me.

“What is it?” Uncle asked.

“There…” I pointed towards the window. “Someone is there…”

Uncle rushed to the window and pulled aside the curtain. He looked around for a few moments. “See no one!” He declared.

I quickly rushed to the window. Just in time to see a blur of a white sari disappear round the corner. The witch! She was vamoosing.

I looked at uncle in bewilderment. Surely, he could not have missed her.

Uncle looked blankly back at me. With an accusing gaze, I looked at him. But he avoided it, turning to Mohan and reprimanding him. Without another word, he left the room. It was unlikely of him.

*Screw uncle!* I ran out, rounded the building, and reached outside my room. I looked around and found nothing amiss. The woman was nowhere to be seen. The darkness and silence looked back at me. *The corpse had given a slip to King Vikram! Ha ha ha!*

I was puzzled. What was he trying to hide? If there were really no witches or vampires, then what had bitten Salim? Which lair were they talking about? What was he going to decimate there?

Something was fishy, definitely. I had to find out. That night I slept fitfully.

5. Desolate Dare - The Witch Lady Again

The next day, I spent chatting with uncle. He seemed determined to spend the day with me. Neither of us raked up the night’s drama. My opportunity arrived when uncle got ready to leave after lunch. I, as usual, began to rib Mohan about the previous night and his beliefs. But the witch woman’s face at the window kept coming to my mind.

“Anish *baba*, if you really want to see vampires and witches, wander in the Khandar after sunset,” he challenged. “You dare to?”

*Sneery Schmuck! He was daring my cojones.*

Mohan was busy with his work, but he still had an eye on me. This was his chance to get even. I was in a dilemma. Either accept the challenge and go against uncle or refuse it and be branded a *phatoo*—a coward.

I looked to see if he was joking. He must have seen the fear and uncertainty on my face, for he teased, “It is easy to be here and brag. But going in the Khandar needs *goatyaa*—balls of steel! ”

His words took me by surprise. The schmuck was growing wings. So I would do a Girish and enter the Khandar.

Chandru’s words instantly came to me. *There are no witches … Salim was bitten on his neck and feet last week...He was warned often not to go in the Tahali Khandar but now it has caused him his death….And no more talk of the Tahali Khandar. One death there is enough…*

Such conflicting thoughts came to me.

Mohan’s words really stung me. I could not back off from a challenge. And that too, from a retard. Besides, silence would be taken as cowardice. To hell with everything, I was not letting this schmuck squeeze my balls.

“Ok Schmuck, I will go to the Khandar!” I said with bravado.

It was his turn to grow silent, hearing the unexpected.

A moment later he said, “On one condition. Go After sunset. Tie this red cord tightly round the trunk of the banyan tree in center of the Khandar.” In a flash, he handed me a long cord.

*The f…ing schmuck!* He was doing everything to make it tough. I could not back off now from whatever he was throwing at me. I swore I would get even with him.

To Tahali Khandar, go I must, but first things first.

At 4:15 pm I was knocking Girish’s door. His old man opened the door and instantly recognized me. “How have you been, Anish?” he inquired.

“Perfecto! How is Girish doing?”

 “Giri is doing fine. He is not there right now,” he said rather reluctantly.

“Okay, I’ll come later. I have a lot of catching up to do.”

“I understand. Bye, I’ll ask him to call you,” he promised and hastily shut the door on my face. *Bastard!*

Thanks to my sharp ears I heard a voice inquire, “Who is that papa?”

Instantly, I recognized it.Girish!*Why, that lying old coot!*

“Salim had come, but I said you were sleeping.” I heard his old man lie.

To say I was puzzled, would be an understatement. It was like being in the Catacombs without a light. I stood listening, waiting for some interesting tidbits of conversation, but the sound grew muffled.

I pledged to myself that I would solve this mystery today. Come what may!

Just then, I saw a pair of kohl-lined eyes watching me! This time she was standing under a tree, staring at me. Her eyes, intense as ever. Once again, she beckoned me with her finger.

My first instinct was to flee. But I could not; after all, she was just a harmless old woman. Besides, I wanted to confront her about last night. I began towards her, calmly. But as I drew closer, a strange fear began to envelop me. Her solemn face relaxed, and she smiled. A smile that could mean anything. Now it seemed like victory, a malevolent kind. All my bravado was melting I was ready to flee at the first sign of danger.

Yards before her, I stopped. Her smile now showed a set of decayed teeth. I stared at her, not knowing what to say.

“Doooo not go to the Tahali Khandar…Anish. There is only evil there...” she blurted. Then grew silent as if contemplating on something.

I waited for a few moments, then decided to terminate the encounter, as she was spooking me. Turning around, I briskly walked towards the main road.

“Wait Anish…” I heard her call sweetly. But I continued walking till I reached the road. I hailed a rickshaw and got in. When I turned behind, she was squatting on the ground, watching me angrily.

Slowly, she raised a finger and wagged it at me. It could be anything, a threat or a warning. I shivered inwardly. I was surprised with myself for being rattled so easily.

My next stop was our lawyer, Yash’s house. After all, he was my dad’s trusted confidante, like Chandru.

To my surprise, his attitude towards me was ice cold. Before I could utter a word about Salim or Girish, he spoke non-stop, “I will hand all your property papers to you on your twenty-first birthday in the presence of Chandra. The transfer will happen then and there.”

“But a couple of days back you phoned uncle saying some papers are lost.” I interrupted.

He rubbished it, declaring that he hadn’t spoken to uncle for over two months.

*Who was lying? My old coot or the bloody liar lawyer. Now Tahali Khandar wasn’t my priority.*

Within minutes, my rickshaw was speeding to Salim’s house.

No one was there. The door was locked. It wore a deserted look.

There was no sign of a living soul. It seemed to be abandoned. As I moved around, I could not help feeling I was being watched. I disregarded it. The encounter with the old woman had made me jittery, I reckoned.

An unexplainable eeriness shot through me. I dashed to the road for a rickshaw. The corner of my eye caught something move at a distance.

It was her again, squatting down, picking up something from the ground. And the frightening thing was she was exactly at the spot where I was standing a few moments ago! I have heard of people doing voodoo, using the victim’s belongings. Was she doing that? Did I drop something? How did she reach here so fast?

Then I remembered I had visited Yash uncle before coming here. But yet I could not convince myself. How did she know I was coming here? Was she stalking me? I could think of nothing.

Besides, there was still another unpleasant task to complete before night.

6. Desolate Dare - The Decapitated Head

Sunset was barely an hour away, but the sky was downcast. An hour before sunset, I was ready to set off. The schmuck now seemed apprehensive. “Do you want to do this Anish *baba*?” He asked me just before I could leave.

I gave a freezing look, silencing him.

He tied a sacred string on my wrist as protection. I also took the shmuck’s cord and my dad’s windcheater as a good luck charm. The *same* windcheater he wore on that fateful night.

A good distance away were the ruins. I stopped. It stood silent, and a strange beckoning force seemed to emit from it that scared me.

The infamous history of the ruins added to its horror. It now looked foreboding against the dark and gloomy skies. Lush green grass surrounded the black stoned wall that rose majestically, but evilly.

Fresh monsoon grass had taken root all over the wall, blending its green with the black. The complete atmosphere seemed to suit the occupant’s lair.

The entrance was large and yawning; beyond it was a jumble of wild grass and stones. I stepped into the ruins. A gust of wind rushed behind me as if coaxing me in.

A mournful groan sounded, announcing my entry. The walls ran in an oblate shape, at the far end were dark niches.

I was down to business, looking for the banyan tree. With a thudding heart, I began searching for the accursed tree.

All of a sudden my skin erupted with goose bumps. The wind felt cold against it. To add to my fear, I could feel myself being followed. Try as much, I could not bring myself to turn around.

What was I going to do? Turn around, and vamoose out of here. But a certain pride would not allow me to turn tail. I had to prove myself.

*Tie the string and vamoose out of here Shit Head,* a voice propelled from within. *Just a little more, it called again.* Foolishly, I heeded to it.

I kept reminding myself it was dusk, not night. As if in answer, the sky became ominously dark and a faint drizzle hit the earth. I took no shelter in my windcheater; I was oblivious to it.

I trudged on and on. Every moment I expected the ancient undead to appear out of those niches. Every sort of creatures seen in horror films, I imagined.

The cold wind passing my ears seemed to whisper evil incantations. Suddenly, I heard a tinkle. A soft metallic sound in the thick grass. I stopped and listened. Moments later, I heard another.

Fear froze me. Stories of the witch appearing in the ruins on the *Amavasya* night—the black night, came to mind.

They said she used to play and run around in the company of her vampires. Her screeching laughter and the tinkling of her *payals*—anklets could be heard. My nerves collapsed. I turned around. Instantly, I knew I was doomed.

*Standing near a clearing was the witch-woman!*

She just stood there watching me, her wide kohl-lined eyes furious. Her long salt and pepper colored hair streaming down the sides of her head. Her sudden appearance caused my body to grow completely immobile. Terror filled my being. I was never so frightened in my life. For moments, we stood there watching each other.

Slowly, she lifted a hand and pointed a withered digit at me. “Anish, I have told you never to come here…now I have to warn you about…”

Her voice released my immobile body. I dropped my windcheater, turned around and ran blindly, not realizing I was going deeper into the Khandar.

“Aneeeeeesh,” her voice trailed behind me.

I continued this blind run. God only knows for how long!

Minutes later, I was completely winded. I could run no longer. I stopped, doubled over, trying to get back my breath. I was relieved she had not bothered to follow me. Or had she? She was nowhere to be seen. Only then I realized I had dropped my dad’s windcheater in blind haste. I terribly regretted having lost it. There was not an ounce of courage to go back and retrieve it.

Just then, I heard a sound behind me. I turned around. Only to see the grasses on the shadowy ground parting.

I stared in horror at the sight below me, unable to move. *Salim’s head appeared from under the ground amidst the parted grasses.*

The decapitated head soiled with mud was watching me, wide-eyed.

With a scream, I spun around and raced to the entrance.

The rain came down in sheets, drenching me to the skin. I ran wildly, half-running, half-stumbling out of the ruins. Heading towards the village, there I dropped to the ground, breathless, feeling safe among humans.

I gagged and coughed on my breath, wondering how narrowly I had escaped. I had seen Salim’s fucking ghost; I kept repeating to myself.

7. Desolate Dare - The Jigsaw Solved

A pair of shoes suddenly appeared near me. I jerked in fear and looked up. Uncle Chandra, Thank God! I hugged him tightly. I had never been so relieved in my life. I was trembling and sobbing uncontrollably. So what if he had lied to me, at least he was human.

“What is it, Anish? What?” asked uncle, alarmed.

I continued to hold him tightly and repeat. “Uncle…I have seen the dead Salim… I have seen the dead Salim…Also the witch.”

“What rubbish!” said Uncle. “He is dead weeks ago. And what witch are you talking about?”

“No Uncle, I have seen him…His frigging ghost…” I said between sobs.

“Where...? Where Anish?” he asked.

“In the… Tahali Khandar…”

“Didn’t I tell you not to go there…”

“Sorry, but you have to believe me…Please…”

Seeing me shaking uncontrollably, Uncle put an arm around me. “Let’s get away from this rain and have some hot drink.”

He guided me to a roadside tea shop. A simple shelter of tin and asbestos. We drank hot tea and ate *vadaas*. I was beginning to feel good.

“Now young man, let’s hear your story. About Salim’s ghost.”

“You have got to bloody believe me…! I really saw frigging Salim…!

”

“Cut the abuses,” Uncle munched on the *vadaas* and interrupted.

I was in a damn state of stress and truthfully told him the whole story word to word. Even the eavesdropping episode.

Abruptly, I stopped speaking. My eyes were at the doorway, wide with terror. My hand started trembling, spilling tea on the table.

Standing at the door was *Salim!* Grinning from ear to ear, waving his hand at me!

“Salim…there… at the door.” I choked.

Uncle turned and watched the door. Then he turned back to me. “Where, donkey, where? There is no one there.”

I looked at uncle as if he was insane. Salim was standing there all the time, grinning at me. Was Salim’s ghost only visible to me? I glanced back at uncle in utter disbelief.

He continued merrily munching on the *vadaas* and suddenly burst out laughing.

He turned around and called, “*Yedaa* Salim, come join us. Anish, he’s called *Yedaa* for his crazy acts. Now you should get this title!”

After *Yedaa* Salim joined us, uncle told him my story. The two had a belly full of laughs as I sat there like a hunchback. *Uncle Chandra hope you have a good explanation.*

After a severe, severe reprimanding uncle explained, “Tahali Khandar has now been granted heritage status but had plenty of swamps. Volunteers from far and wide have registered to do a clean-up job. Salim and Girish were bitten, but not by a vampire or a witch, but by mosquitoes. Mosquitoes breed amply in marshes. It is not this *Yedaa* Salim who had died of malaria; it was another Salim, Salim Mudasser, a case of mistaken identity. Salim Mudasser and Girish had gone there to help clean up. Of course, our Girish too got infected with what seems like malaria, but is recovering rapidly. Well, about me entering the lair and killing them. I was planning to take an army of volunteers and disinfect the entire Khandar for good!”

“But uncle, I overheard you tell someone over the phone that Girish had been suffering from bouts of fright fevers. Surely he was extremely scared of…”

“You *Andaa*, I didn’t say Girish has been suffering from bouts of fright fevers but, had said, he has been suffering from bouts of night fevers. Malarial victims shiver, especially after sunset. I was speaking to our village headman.”

“But uncle you lied about the missing papers and Giri’s dad lied to me about Girish.”

“Yeah, as soon as you left Girish’s house, his dad phoned me and spoke of your visit. You see, Anish, besides malaria Girish also showed signs of H1N1 sickness commonly known as Swine flu. On the outbreak of malaria and Swine flu; the headman, Girish’s dad, Yash and I, decided to keep the matter strictly to ourselves. If these simple villagers would get even a whiff of the matter, panic would breakout. Surely, our fickle government would have snatched away the status even before it was officially conferred on Tahali Khandar. Also, we only assumed that Giri had Swine flu. Until our doubts were confirmed we had to quarantine him. And about not telling you, we know how over smart you are!”

I ignored uncle’s jibe and asked. “And the old witch-woman?”

“She is no old witch-woman. She is just an afflicted woman who had lost her son ages ago in the Tahali Khandar. Since then, she wanders in the ruins hoping to find her son. It was this ‘senile’ witch-woman who came a while ago, in the heavy rain. Told me you were screaming and running in the Tahali Khandar like you had lost your marbles. Otherwise, how would I know your whereabouts? She also returned your dad’s windcheater. You had dropped at the Khandar.” Then, with utmost respect, he handed me the windcheater and murmured, “History repeats itself.”

*History repeats itself?* I did not know what these words meant but accepted the windcheater. I now felt a sense of gratitude for Maltibai*...relief*. *Suddenly I realized uncle was up to old tricks again. How could an old woman rush back to our house to inform Chandru about me? Somebody was keeping tabs on me… the lying coot-Chandru.*

“But last night, uncle, why did you deny seeing Maltibai peeping at the window?”

“Because Anish, last night there wasn’t anyone near the window …”

I waited for a few moments for uncle to laugh and say it was a joke. But nothing of that happened. He was talking to Salim. But I was sure I had seen Maltibai. *Speak up, man?*

Hearing their conversation, I realized Salim used to go artifact hunting in and around Tahali Khandar. He had dug a ditch five feet deep, so when he stood in it, his head came up to the ground. He had heard my footsteps and stood up to investigate and so it seemed Salim’s head ‘appeared’ from amidst the grasses.

I could not help laughing at myself.

8. Desolate Dare - The Ugly Truth

Uncle Chandra knew I had learned my lesson. After Salim left, I pushed my luck once more.

“Uncle, what happened to dad? How did he die?”

The question instantly put an end to all the fun.

“Anish,” he sighed. “Today I will tell what you always wanted to know about Arjun’s death. I usually hate to talk about it. Today you will also understand why I did not want you to go to the Tahali Khandar, moreover for a stupid dare…”

Uncle grew silent, as if he was reliving the time. I could feel the pain he was undergoing. Slowly he began. “Many years ago, on that fateful night, Arjun and I had gone to the Tahali Khandar as a dare. It was a dare between us. Also, let me add, it was the most foolish thing of our life. But being young and errant back then, we did it. We were to enter the Tahali Khandar from either side of the ruins at the dead of night. And meet at the highest point on the fort wall facing the sea.”

Uncle stopped again. He was reaching the terrible part.

He took a slow deep breath and began, “All went well and we met at our rendezvous. We were standing there on the fort wall… relaxing, congratulating and back slapping each other. All the while, we were watching the surf crash against the rocks way down at the foot of the fort wall. The adrenalin was still surging through our veins.

Suddenly, Maltibai, appeared out of nowhere. So sudden was her appearance that both of us were startled. Before I knew I stumbled backwards over the low parapet of the fort wall. In sheer reflex, I grabbed on to Arjun and the two of us fell onto the treacherous rocks below.”

Once again, uncle stopped. His eyes glistened with tears. “I fell on the rocks and blacked out. I got a few stitches on my head and sprained an arm and leg. Arjun was washed into the sea. After a few hours he was found, badly battered. He had sustained very serious injuries on his head, ribs, and arm. And battling the open seas had worsened his condition; infection had set in the wounds. Arjun knew his end was near. We all three knew it was an accident and vowed to keep it a secret, or else the villagers would lynch an innocent lady as a witch. After all, she too had lost her son in the Khandar. The same place where Arjun had fallen. Her son, too, was washed away in the sea. Only, his body was never recovered. He was on a dare too!”

At that moment, strangely, I was not feeling so much for dad as much I was feeling for uncle. I could understand the guilt uncle was living with. I hugged him and the two of us wept.

“How many times today had Maltibai met you, Anish?”

“Four bloody times… damned that witch-woman…!” I had to direct my anger at someone. I had lost my father for no fault of his.

“Ssssh Anish, don’t curse her. Maltibai felt guilty for the accident and tried to tell you. That’s why she followed you all day. Don’t forget, she alerted me; you were lost in the ruins today.”

“Don’t forget that bloody old bitch killed dad.” I retorted.

“Anish! Remember, Arjun held nothing against her.”

“Big Deal!”

“Maybe it was a mistake telling you the truth!”

I angrily stood up and walked to the window. Uncle’s advocating for her was pissing me off. Outside, the thunder and lightning were wreaking havoc in the dark skies. It mirrored the inside of me.

Uncle approached me.

“Uncle, why the hell do you keep supporting her?” I exploded in his face. “Have you got a soft spot for her?” I was near to tears. Angry tears.

His silence told me there was something. I quelled my anger.

As he waited, he appeared somewhat at a discomfort.

 “Anish…” His lips quivered before he could speak. “Anish…. there is a thing I have to tell you… also show you some papers. But this is not the right place.”

“Then where else?” I asked. A lump of anxiety was forming in my throat. *Was uncle trying to weasel away my inheritance?*

“Let’s go home.” He said and walked out.

All the way home, I could not keep my rising anxiety down. All thoughts of the evening occurrences were pushed back.

Back home, uncle took me to his den and sat me down. But I was surprised when he asked me. “Care for a cigarette or maybe a beer?”

I looked at uncle dumbfounded. *Whats, up dude?*

“Don’t give me that look!” He stated in a matter-of-fact tone. “Don’t you think I’m not aware of your so-called *extra-curricular activities*?”

I instantly colored. I sat tongue tied, waiting for the next thunderbolt. Uncle got out a cigarette pack and offered me one. I quickly declined. It had been years since I had seen him smoke. He pushed a glass of drink in my hand.

“Relax son! It’s just like coke!”

Surprised with uncle’s pushiness. I eyed the drink suspiciously.

“Don’t worry, Arjun would have done the same. And within a few days, you will be a certified adult. So drink up!”

*Oh yeah, so now what am I a kid?*

I reluctantly sipped the drink. It was syrupy and spicy. The stuff ignited my throat.

“What is this brew?” I complained.

“This is India’s version of tequila, boy, brewed from spices.”

I wished uncle would end his shenanigans and come out with it. The shame of being caught was wearing off. Now it was being replaced with indignation. *How dare uncle spy on me?*

Uncle lit a cigarette and took a deep puff. For a moment, I felt like joining him.

Exhaling the smoke, he looked at me. I braced myself for yet another revelation.

“Maltibai is the mother of my child…my son.” He dropped a thunderbolt.

*Aw shit! Looney Vishy!* I swore inwardly. After all, the boy was a bastard! I immediately felt pity for Vishy and aunt. This explained why the boy was always aloof and shy. He probably had somehow sensed it.

Uncle stopped and looked at me. He had a look of pain. I felt pity. I reached over and grasped his palm. He too grasped it as if drawing strength.

“Does Vishy know about it?” I felt compelled to speak.

“No.” Uncle answered.

“And Aunt?” I continued.

“No, only Arjun knew about it.”

“I am going to reveal it to you because I believe you are mature enough to understand.”

I felt sick, suddenly; the pitiful face of Vishy appeared before me. I was not sure I wanted to hear it.

Uncle took another deep breath, before beginning “It was those days when Maltibai was young and worked as a maid in my house. In due course, one thing led to another, and soon Maltibai was pregnant with my child.”

I swore under my breath. *Another illegitimate love story! It was none of my goddamned business whom he slept with!*

“She did not disclose this to me till the baby-bump was showing. I was petrified; I flatly denied accepting the truth. If the news went out, I wouldn’t be able to face the world. She was of a lower caste while I was of a higher one. I ranted mercilessly at her. It was the most pathetic act of cowardice in my life!”

Uncle stopped as if reliving the moment and then started again.

My mind could not help going back to Vishy. *From now on, I would befriend him.*

“Later my conscience pricked me,” continued uncle. “I relented, a little. I met her father and explained the delicate situation to him. Before the villagers discovered I convinced him to send her to the city with me to abort the child. I was playing the Good Samaritan! Even then, I did not confess.”

Uncle stopped. I could read the remorse in his eyes.

“Her helpless father agreed. He had no choice,” began Uncle. “An unwed mother is a shame to the village. Poor Maltibai abided by my decision without a murmur. I felt as helpless as her. In the city, she gave birth to our child. On returning, I arranged her marriage. Within a year or two, she had a son, but misfortune struck her. Her husband died shortly. Ten years later, her son disappeared in the ruins. Even after a thorough search, he could not be found. Naturally, she lost her mental balance. He was on a *dare* too.”

“And Vishy? Does he know the truth?” I interrupted.

Uncle looked at me for a moment before continuing. “Vishy knowing this is hardly important.

Unable to bear any children, Arjun adopted Maltibai’s child…”

Just for a moment, uncle paused. Realization then hit me with a force of a million-volt shock.

 “Oh my God!” I cried. “So, you mean to say, you are my biological father and that…that Maltibai is my…my mother!”

Uncle’s gentle nod confirmed my presumption. I looked at him, shocked. It was as if he had cracked a vulgar joke. Imagine a *kaamwaali* *bai*—domestic maid, *my mother,* and a son of a mere foot soldier, *my father*!

I did not know what to do. I paced around a couple of times, agitated. In a moment I realized all my doubts about uncle were coming true. Uncle was trying to weasel me out of my inheritance. A fury whipped through my being. *How low could a man fall! Why the back-stabbing, conniving pig! Claiming to be my father! Trying to tarnish my royal lineage! And at what price? For a little bit of land! Where were all his high ideals?*

Instantly, all my respect for him dropped. I looked at uncle straight in his eye. “What is it, Chandra? Want to hog my inheritance?” I punctuated it with an ugly laugh.

He looked at me aggrieved.

“Mr. Chandra Amre! Don’t give me that innocent-sorry look!” “Am I not aware of your *so-called extra-curricular activities*?” I imitated him. I paced some more and turned to him.

“Listen son, I…” Uncle began.

“Don’t call me son!” I interrupted. “I am not your son, Chandru!” I spat, a sardonic smile on my face. “Don’t think you can grab my property! I will do a DNA test!”

 “Ok fine…Anish just read this note before anything else,” said uncle.

My hands trembled as I held the old crinkly paper. I opened it and instantly recognized my father’s handwriting. (The handwriting I had always admired in his journals.) Slowly, I began reading.

***Dear Anish, if you are reading this letter, it means three things have happened. First-you have come of age. Second-Chandra has told you all the facts. Third-I am no longer alive.***

It was like dad, direct and blunt. I smiled despite tears brimming.

***Son, I am really sorry to tell you I am not your father. But it does not mean I never regarded you as a son.***

Reading those words brought tears to me. I pressed my eyes tightly to prevent them from rolling down. I went back to reading the letter, but I knew the next sentence would sever the last of the ties with dad. And I was right.

***You are the son of Chandra and Malti...***

The words felt like being socked in the gut. I calmed down and continued to read.

***Believe me. Chandra, your father, is the most honorable man I have ever known. He has probably taken the complete blame of disowning you. But trust me, he was ready to bear the consequences the moment you were born. It was I who persuaded him not to do any of his foolish bravados. It would devastate his family. I took the responsibility of looking after you. But I guess fate had stored something else for us. So, son, trust him with your life. I have nothing more to tell you. Besides, writing can be a pain. God bless you. Just remember what I have said.***

***P.S I bear no malice against Malti for the accident on the fort.***

***Regards, your dad. Arjun Gaikwad.***

I folded the letter, placed it on the table and turned away; I was an unwanted child…the bitter truth sunk in me…I felt unclean. The atmosphere inside the room was suffocating; I stalked out of the place. The rain had grown steady; I stood in it drenching myself, trying to cleanse my unclean feeling.

Minutes passed till I heard someone call my name. I knew who it was.

“Anish.” He called once again. I forced myself to turn. There stood a man before me with the most regrettable look on his face. He had sensed the turmoil up surging in me and he knew he was to be blamed. Today, he was a complete stranger. All the years of familiarity had died within minutes. What should I call him, dad or uncle? Confusion arose in me.

The familiar *stranger* put an arm around my shoulder. I was tempted to shrug it off, though it felt comforting. I let it stay. After all, we were bloodlines.

“Forget the past.” Began the familiar *stranger*. “I will do anything you want, and then we can start a new life. And your inheritance is intact. Not a paisa is less.”

I turned to the *stranger* angrily. But all I saw was pain and tears in his eyes. I could not hold back myself; I flung myself on him and embraced him tightly. “I want to see mother…Now!” I bawled out like a child.

“Yes, we shall go now.” He answered back, hugging me tightly. “A huge load is off my shoulders!”

I relented. For the first time, I too put my arm around his shoulder. Like best buddies, we started for Maltibai’s house—my *ma*. Now I realized why she followed me all the time. *She, being my mother, damn it, wanted to talk to me.* And all this time, I had ignored her. *I had been one sordid prick!*

All my pretenses had been stripped away within a moment. *I felt lower than Vishy. Even Mohan was much better than me. It was I who was the bastard!*

9. Desolate Dare - Truth is Stranger than Fiction

While walking, soaking in the pouring rain, we found ourselves facing an approaching funeral procession. We respectfully moved aside and uncle inquired about the deceased person.

 “Maltibai.” Came the reply.

Uncle and I peered through the crowd and saw her sallow face. A wave of remorse and sorrow hit us. “When did she die?” Uncle further inquired.

“Yesterday evening, Sahib.” Some of the mourners stopped and answered.

“Yesterday or today?” Uncle demanded loudly in the otherwise mournful air.

“Yesterday, around three in the evening. Our hospital’s report has confirmed the time of death.” They answered almost in unison.

Uncle and I looked at each other. Blanking out the world around us, a flurry of thoughts ran through our mind.

We felt our bodies’ slump to the slushy road, stunned.

“Sahib, are you alright?” Concerned voices around us asked. “Do you want some help?”

We continued to stare at the funeral procession as it proceeded towards the crematorium. The downpour grew heavy, cutting down all visibility. But images in our minds were crystal clear.

MARKETING MURDER

1. Marketing Murder - Prologue

The Chaudari Haveli was built on a site that was once a mass grave. It was built way back in 1927. But the site had a gory and much ancient history...

Gambavandevi—The British Indian Province of Central India 1839

*The pit was a mass grave. Human corpses lay sprawled in an ugly heap with barely a thin coverlet of soil over them. It seemed as if the mud was strewn only to cover the grisly sight.*

 *From above it was a gory scene, a jumble of human limbs all twisted and skewed, half decaying skulls and disemboweled torsos.*

*The heavy heat prevailing in the region would soon transform the mass grave into human mulch. For meters around the pit, the air would grow foul. With a stench of disease, blood, and death.*

*The eight villages of Gambavandevi had been hit by a year of drought, then by plague. Men and cattle succumbed to the disease like dried leaves in autumn. Wood fell insufficient to consign the deceased and the villagers irreligiously buried their dead, more out of the fear of infecting the healthy.*

*Strangers hauled the corpses into the pit like sacks at a loading dock, with no respect at all.*

*Weeks later, the then ruling English took the matter into their hands. They adopted the quickest way, the Kill-to-Control policy.*

*The British Cavalry rode into the village like a horde of demons from hell. Raiding the villages and slaughtering every diseased person. Even those individuals showing mild symptoms of the disease.*

*All these slaughtered ones were tossed in the pit. But all of them were not corpses. Many still held a spark of life in them. And according to the religious scriptures, the villagers’ belief—the dead and the live should never be rested together...*

2. Marketing Murder - The Forsaken Haveli

**Gambavandevi—1991. The State of Madhya Pradesh, India.**

The bungalow was known as Chaudari Haveli by all. It was a sprawling building. A double-story structure of slate-colored solid blocks of stone. It had large windows adorned with glass, wrought iron winding stairs on the outside, stone flooring and stairs inside etc., all colonial style. Everything was solid but drab, one of the many remnants of the pre-independence era.

It had seen nearly three quarters of a century. Now, it was weather-beaten and disused. Weeds and other feral vegetation left their mark on the building. Being away from the city, it was now used as a sanctuary for peace and tranquility. It legally belonged to the Chaudaris—their third generation, Sunny Chaudari. He was now there with his cousin and his two friends to spend the weekend.

“A bit dusty, *na*?” He spoke more out of a need to break the silence. His baby-skinned complexion was rosy red from exertion. Sunny Chaudari alias Sumo was just like his name suggested, chubby and well-padded with blubber. He was extremely intelligent, a talented stage actor and director. Bespectacled, nerdy, and the first cousin of Narayan.

Narayan set down his traveler's case and studied the gloomy and musty interior. The high ceiling further increased the gloom. He hated high ceilings. It gave him a feeling of insecurity.

“The place will work,” said Narayan, as if to fill in the silence. The silence in the building was deafening. Ganesh beside him simply sucked on a cigar and stared stonily back at him. Ganesh spoke rarely. This irritated him.

Ganeshpati Hollerman was a muscular youth almost bullish in physique. His limbs appeared disproportion, short hands and long legs. He was tall, and dark chocolate-skinned with a stubborn brush of black hair. His forehead narrowed forward, giving him a Minotaur like look. If born in the dark ages, he would easily candidature for the freak show. He originally hailed from the West Indies and was a half-breed. His father was a Caribbean and mother, an Indian.

He was heavily hooked on drugs, while the others were just amateurs. He smoked, snorted and even injected himself with lethal stuff.

 None of them liked him, and his silence was sinister. An aura of menace seemed to emanate from him. They had carted him along with a plan.

Shanker killed the van’s engine and walked into the building. Tall, well-built and energetic, he seemed to have walked off the fashion ramp. Everyone called him Shan. The only problem was his temper; he could lose it in a jiffy. This landed him several times in trouble, so he carried a Glock.

Joining his friends, he looked around the large but gloomy place and said, “Doesn’t the place remind you of the Ramsey’s horror house in the movies...only scarier…”

Above them, some pigeons fluttered out of their niches. Startled, the group broke into nervous laughter.

Only Ganesh remained silent. Then his eyes grew alert and his muscles tense. As if he had sighted something at the far end of the house. Only Sumo saw this momentary change. He looked in the direction and saw the foreboding semi-gloom. He shivered inwardly and hurried up the dungeon-like stone stairs after his friends. It led to the first floor. A long passage lay before them, with rooms on the left next to each other. Even in daylight, the passage looked scary. Sumo wondered how he would spend the night.

The noon was hot and silent, too silent. Not a soul or even an insect disturbed the silence outside. It created an ethereal feeling—eerie! Each of them occupied adjacent rooms. But Ganesh chose the one at the extreme end of the passage, away from the rest.

Sumo sat reading. Ganesh was on a high, barely able to sit. The other two were deep in conversation.

 “When do we do it?” whispered Narayan.

“After he sleeps,” answered Shan.

“Then let’s tell Sumo.”

Just as they reckoned, Sumo was shocked. “What! Murder Ganesh!..I can’t help you!”

Narayan was the first to speak. “You don’t have to help us...Whatever has to be done, we’ll do it. I ‘m just informing you...”

“Why the hell did you bring me along?”Sumo asked with displeasure.

“This is your place, but it was the ideal for the job. I could not just leave you at home. It would seem suspicious…” explained Narayan.

“Besides, we’ll get a hundred grand apiece for the job. It’s real cool. Think what you can do with it,” tempted Shan. “Also, there won’t be an enquiry for Ganesh ‘cos he’s an illegal immigrant. There’s no record of him entering the country,” he continued.

“We simply increase the concentration in his syringe…,” continued Shan in explanation, “let him inject himself. Bang! The job is done! He dies; we bury him in these jungles and forget about it. Nobody will know. We’ll say he left for West Indies.”

“But why ...why, why kill him?” Sumo asked.

“Dad’s order,” answered Narayan. “Why do you think he’s in India? For sight-seeing? He left the Windies with a death warrant. And I asked Dad for the job.”

Narayan’s father was Sumo’s uncle and a prosperous textile merchant dealing mainly in exports. But that was just a front. He was an illegal drug dealer. Very few knew about it, Sumo had his suspicions.

 “If you don’t, we squeal to Reena, you are a pinky.” retorted Narayan viciously.

Reena was Sumo’s fiancée whom he loved passionately. Few knew he was a bisexual. They had once caught him red-handed with a twelve-year-old boy.

Sumo reddened first with shame and then with anger. “You have trapped me!” he gritted fiercely.

“What stuff you could get for her with the hundred grand!” Narayan tried to pacify. “What have you to do? Nothing! If anything goes wrong, there is always Big C to fall back on. Papa wields a fair amount of power and influence!”

Sumo looked at their expectant faces and shook his head positively. They punctuated their plot with a small smoke of hash, but it was mainly to reinforce courage.

Silently, they tiptoed to Ganesh’s room and opened the door. The door creaked slightly on its hinges. It sounded loud in the stillness.

They froze. Ganesh lay undisturbed.

Shan pulled on a pair of gloves and they entered the room. A half-filled syringe lay by Ganesh’s bedside. Shan squeezed out all the contents into the washbasin. Got out a vial of a similar looking liquid and re-filled the syringe. Placing it just the way it was, he left.

They lingered out of Ganesh’s open door. Shan instantly explained, “It will be a matter of minutes. Ganesh takes his drugs with clockwork precision. For little more than a week we have been observing him, we know his routine! Our lethal cocktail will do the job!”

“Our lethal cocktail… Our lethal cocktail!” shrieked Sumo. “You two! Killers…”

“Stop whining, you bozo,” interjected Narayan viciously. “Do you need to wake him, with your crying, sissy?”

Within minutes Ganesh arose, simply looked at them. Without a mutter, he picked up the syringe. Their hearts pumped harder.

Unhesitantly, Ganesh inserted the needle into his forearm and emptied the liquid.

They watched anxiously as the Caribbean climbed into the bed.

When the trio looked at each other, stark fear was writ on each face. Suddenly, they were aware of the acute silence enveloping them. Despite the heat, Sumo could feel his sweat, cold. He also felt an urge for a leak. But didn’t have the courage to go alone. A raw fear gripped his innards.

“Let’s dig a hole an’ make it deep,” drawled Shan. Trying to do a weak mimic of a spaghetti western character.

The other two stayed, solidified.

Shan quickly began to close the doors of the rooms. Narayan stopped him. “Let it be open.”

“C’mon then, let’s hurry,” whispered Shan urgently

.

Slowly, Narayan moved. Sumo followed.

3. Marketing Murder - The Grotesque Burial.

It was half-past six in the evening when they finished digging the grave. A shallow one, for it was hard work. The sun was the color of blood, setting over the western horizon. Dusk began to give way to the night, a harbinger of the unexplainable. Sumo shivered with the thought.

Reluctantly, they trooped to their rooms. The stone stairs led up to the narrow passage and to the room. It was long and cold, akin to the medieval catacombs.

Their feet grew leaden, mouths pasty and skin ashen as they reached their rooms.

All the doors of their rooms lay open except Ganesh’s. His door was shut.

“It could not be the wind..,” Shan whispered. Interrupting whatever logical thoughts others harbored.

“Shut up... Shan,” Sumo pleaded in a dry voice.

The wind swept through the passage and a moan seemed to fill it. They walked stiffly and slowly, expecting the unnatural.

The first room was Narayan’s. They peered cautiously into it.

The room lay empty. “A pack of fools you are guys,” whispered Narayan, “to think it harbored a spirit...”

“Screw your lid!” Shan swore, and they continued forward.

Shan and Sumo’s room lay empty and silent.

 “Should have reckoned,” added Sumo as they reached Ganesh’s room. “Here lay the father of all horrors!”

The trio stopped before Ganesh’s shut door. They watched it apprehensively. All courage lost.

It seemed long seconds before Shan ventured forward. Almost shakily, he slapped on the switch and the overhead bulb glowed sickly yellow.

Sumo found his throat dry and swallowed a mouthful of air. Rushes of scenes in horror films swirled through his mind. He tried to dismiss it, but it stayed on.

Slowly, Shan gripped the handle and swung open the door.

Something came rushing to him, black and hairy.

Shan screamed. Narayan gasped. Sumo croaked. And it squealed.

The huge rabbit-sized rodent scurried across the stone floor to safety.

“Damn piece of rat-shit!” screamed Narayan after it. But all eyes were on the bed.

Ganesh, lay there undisturbed; a trickle of spittle stained his lips.

They stood dumbly watching him. “Is he dead?” questioned Sumo nervously.

Shan took a step forward and then behind. “We all go in together...” He croaked an order.

Sumo was about to refuse, but Shan’s fury-filled eyes challenged him. All refusals disappeared.

Fearfully, he followed them. The funereal like silence instantly enveloped them.

Ganesh lay there, dark, wooden and shrunken. His skin stretched like parchment across a skull. He showed all the likenesses of a corpse.

With hesitance, Shan grasped the wood-like wrist to check the pulse. Then slowly he checked for heartbeats. And then the breathing, by placing his finger below the nostrils.

“Dead...,” he proclaimed. The single word hung like terror in the silent room. “Check it out,” he ordered. Sumo appeared fear-ridden.

 “Touch it!” he ordered again, like a man possessed. They stood frozen.

“Touch it... it won’t bite...,” he ordered with harsh laughter.

They jumped at the order. Narayan abused - a mixture of anger and fear. Sumo looked too stiff to even curse.

Shan was at him, a hand clamped at Narayan’s throat. “Son of a bitch...you abused me...never do it again...” He pushed Narayan towards the inert body. “I’ll kill you like this, Darkie.”

Narayan’s eyes bulged with fear and pain as his face touched the chest. “No ... no ‘am sorry..,” he croaked through pain and fear.

Slowly, he released him and turned to Sumo. Shan’s lips were tight like a clam. “Touch...!” He ordered.

Sumo was quick, like an obedient dog. Yet his hand hovered over the inert form.

Shan grasped it and pushed his hand down ...bull’s-eye, on the dead man’s face.

Ganesh’s body was cold, chilly, almost clammy, and repugnant. Sumo whimpered pitifully.

Shan released his hand and barked “Let’s do away with this garbage!”

The two slunk aside without much movement. Pure evil seemed to emanate from Shan.

Hauling Ganesh’s body would be a problem; he easily weighed over 180lbs. However, Shan was adamant. Quickly, he bent and wrapped Ganesh in a coverlet, mummy-like. That done, he stood there as if admiring his handiwork.

The other two continued to slink in the corner in silence.

Then, with a satisfied grunt, Shan grabbed the two corners of one end of the blanket. “Lift the other ends!” he ordered the duo.

Like whip-trained animals, they jumped, grabbing the ends. With a mighty effort, they heaved the load off the bed.

A croak of pain erupted from Sumo. He felt he had slipped a disc. A menacing look from Shan silenced him. Using every ounce of strength, he began hauling the heavy load with the others.

Slowly they began down the long, cold, and dark corridor. To Sumo, it seemed like a procession; high priest and the followers carrying a human sacrifice to perform barbaric rituals.

A short distance down the corridor, Sumo felt he needed rest. The load weighed a ton, but he stumbled along, too afraid to protest. Fortunately for him, Shan was the first to put down the load for a well-deserved rest.

After frequent breaks, they at last reached the bottom of the stairs. They stumbled out into the dark night. The grass waved as if in fear, and the wind rustled the leaves in mournful whispers. Shan paraded stiffly, and headed straight towards the freshly dug grave.

The grave looked yawning and foreboding, though shallow. Shadows were beginning to play tricks. He kneeled as if paying honors to a loved one and carefully lowered the cumbersome load in.

The shroud-covered load soon disappeared under a torrent of dirt. They quickly covered the pit and hastily rose to leave. This entire business was frighteningly gross!

The night lay like a dark mist around them, and the moon had not risen. They walked warily back to the bungalow. Looking back over their shoulder repeatedly; expecting the worst.

Suddenly Shan looked over his shoulder and broke into a run. Crashing through the vegetation, stumbling as he ran.

In sheer terror, the two blindly followed. Believing *something hideous* was chasing them, or even worse. They continued this wild run until they emerged out of the tangled undergrowth.

4. Marketing Murder - The Desecrated Site

The bungalow rose over them like a beacon. Even its eerie dim lights were comforting.

The trio reached the gate and stopped, out of breath. Sumo was the last to reach, puffing and gasping, ashen-faced.

Shan was suddenly a changed person. Gone was his dark demeanor. Gone was that wild look in his eyes. He was now apologetic. In between gasps, he spoke. “Sorry guys, but I freaked out. I felt like... *Something was following us.*”

They knew the feeling. And stood silent. The stone staircase lay before them, black, drab, and cold, akin to the legendary castle. They huddled in a tight bunch and began ascending it. Cold sweat bathing their bodies. Fear slithered through them like a reptile.

“Guys let’s get out of here,” Sumo spoke, a plea.

Narayan immediately interrupted. “Our sudden return may cause suspicions.”

They reached the silent corridor. It was long, empty, and foreboding. Menace was thick in the air.

“Guys, let’s spend the night together,” Again it was Sumo. Again, it was a plea.

The two readily agreed, as if the thought was their own. They all settled in Sumo’s room for the night. Each sat silent, mulling over the day’s happenings.

Only Shan worked on the cigarettes, fixing an ample amount of hashish in each. They needed it tonight.

Slowly, Narayan began speaking. “My granddad frequently told stories of this place. He said the villagers revealed to him that this land was a mass grave…a cursed land. The spirits still haunt this land…the villagers would also tell him about ...”

Shivers raced through Sumo. “Shut up you idiot...shut up,” he screamed.

Unheeded Narayan continued, “Dead and dying men were buried together....in mass graves. On *Amaavasya*—the no moon night, they rise together...”

Shan sprang like a cat, grabbed and slapped Narayan. “Shut up, another word from you and I’ll kill you.... Enough of all this spooky talks…”

Narayan sat there whimpering. “But I know all of us will die tonight… this is cursed land...”

Even before he could complete his sentence, the three froze!

Out in the corridor, they heard footsteps! The slap of naked feet on stone was audible. Footsteps! Then feet dragging on, slowly, as if injured.

Besides the three of them, there was not any other living being. The closest village was miles away. Nobody ventured out after sunset for the fear of big cats and nocturnal unpleasantries.

Fear made them immovable, their breathing felt troubled. Lunar silence prevailed in the room.

*The dragging sound reached their door and stopped.*

Their panic-stricken eyes reached for the latches and bolts. All were shut tight. *They were safe in or were they trapped?*

Whatever was there outside never seemed to move. Seconds ticked like hours.

It slowly came to life when the dragging sound began once more. They traced the sound moving to the end of the corridor. Then, like thunder, one of the door swung open. Its sound reverberated through the silent corridor.

To their horror, they realized *it was Ganesh’s room!*

*Had the dead man come for revenge?*

The trio sat glued, terror-stricken. Minutes ticked into half an hour.

Finally, Shan declared, “I am going out to check. There is no thing as spirits and after life...” The wild look had come over him again.

The two stared dumbly at him. He slowly arose. Only then they realized that he meant what he said.

“No Shan, don’t do it,” Narayan was first to speak. “Let the dead be undisturbed. We made a mistake by killing him. Don’t challenge him now.”

Shan turned around. “You speak as if that Thing out there is a ghost. How can you be so sure? Didn’t you hear the sound of footsteps? Do spirits make sounds while moving? It could be a traveler who has lost his way! You both are nothing but *hijras*—eunuchs!”

“There is evil out there don’t bring it in,” pleaded Narayan “we’ll wait through the night and once its morning we’ll get out of here...”

They waited once again. Minutes passed as ages.

“I’m going out!” Shan suddenly shouted like a possessed man.

“No you are not!” protested Narayan. “The spirits will kill you...then us!”

“Screw the spirits!” He spat. He picked up a rod, unlatched and opened the door.

Within an instant they knew Shan was wrong. Outside, the corridor smelt of mild but fresh cigar smoke. *All along the floor was a trail of fresh muddy footprints leading down the corridor. It ended outside Ganesh’s room.*

5. Marketing Murder - The Unquiet Grave

Shan warily looked up and down the empty corridor. “It can’t happen,” he said aloud, “there’s nothing as ghost... spirits. Once a person dies return is impossible.”

Sumo winced at his words. It also seemed as if Shan never believed it. He only kept repeating it to extract courage.Slowly, he stepped out.

The two looked at each other, and Narayan instantly followed. Sumo found himself alone. Even though not wanting to leave the safety of the room, he dare not be alone. Quickly, he followed Narayan.

They plodded to the dead man’s room and peeped.

*On the spotless white bed cover was an imprint soiled with mud. As if somebody had lain on it.*

Their blood froze to a subzero degree.

Shan swung around savagely. “It cannot be…” he simply muttered. Returning to their room, he grabbed a flashlight and bounded down the corridor.

“I got to see this to believe,” he shouted over his shoulder at them. The other two called after him, but he was walking on with fast-determined steps.

They raced after him. None wanted to be alone.

In a moment, they realized where he was going. *Shan, the possessed man, was going to the grave! The non-believer was going to check the grave for the corpse!*

The duo did not waste a moment. They were at his heels.

He ran down the steps, skipping two at a time. The duo followed, pleading after him.

They reached the open, and the chill bore down on them. It was cold, an unpleasant cold... An uncanny chill that struck right to the spine. They trembled, but not with the cold. Shan walked through the shrubbery, determined. The two followed warily.

Leaves and branches scratched at them as if with harmful intent. The cold grew stronger around them. They reached the copse where they had buried Ganesh. Slowly Shan shone the torch on the spot.

He gasped in fear. The grave lay violently disturbed...empty. *The corpse had disappeared.*

Panic flooded Shan. He turned around and bulled into his two friends and ran.

Narayan almost fell, but quickly regained his balance. Sumo was trying desperately to keep pace with his terrified friends.

Shan raced into the gate. He never went up the stairs. Instinctively, the others knew he was heading for the parked van. He was getting out. As he reached the van, he dug into his pocket and got out his remote. He pointed it at the van and jabbed the button.

With a ping, the van’s door unlocked. In a few strides, he reached it and clambered in. His friends raced around and he flung open the door. He barely waited for them to get in and turned the ignition key. The van purred slightly but did not move. He turned the key, again with the same result.

“Shit!” He swore. Suddenly, the lights in the building blew off, camouflaging the entire area in the black mist—called night. Only the twin cones of the van’s headlights eerily lit the ground ahead.

They sat frozen like rats. Nobody saw a shadow move until too late. The van’s window closest to Sumo shattered like a mild explosion. A hand snaked in and gripped Sumo around his neck.

The other two were out in a flash, flinging the door shut behind them.

In his terror, Sumo barely heard the ping sound of the locking door. This meant he was trapped in the van. *Shan had deliberately locked him up*

*!*

The last thing they saw was a dark muscular arm around Sumo’s neck, squeezing away. Dear life.

The duo ran, the flashlight lighting their path. They ran up the stairs, reached the first floor, and stopped.

 “What the hell is Ganesh doing?” Narayan angrily asked, “I distinctly told him not to bodily harm Sumo. He just had to frighten him to death, or at least drive him insane. We do not want any signs of a struggle in the damn forensic reports. It has to be natural! Damn it!”

“Yeah,” answered Shan, “Everything was going hunky-dory until Ganesh gave a realistic entry. I nearly leaked in my pants.

*Narayan had masterminded the plot to murder Sumo months ago. However, the death had to appear natural. He hated Sumo. He hated him for his intelligence, his silky-smooth tongue, his meticulous sense of etiquette, his ability to be comfortable with friends, relatives, even with Narayan’s father. A sibling hatred had developed. He could never compete with Sumo in any fields except, maybe, fear. Sumo was a terrible coward and everybody knew that.*

*The final straw was when Narayan got the wind of his father’s will. It revealed that he would have to share a good part of his property with Sumo. At that instant, he had plotted with Shan to murder Sumo, promising him a good sum of cash. But it had to be done cleanly.*

*That is when Ganesh Hollerman came into the scene. Ganesh worked in plays before he performed life-endangering stunts for livelihood.*

*Ganesh was a con artist who gave live performance of fake zombies to tourist in the West Indies. It was really a trick. Youths undertaking this act had to undergo arduous training for years. A near fatal drug of dilute proportion would be injected into the performer. It was meant to shut down the nervous system temporarily. And slow down the respiratory system, lowering the body temperature. A kind of short hibernation.*

*In this state, the body would be buried in a shallow grave. Within an hour or so the drug would wear off. The performer would then climb out and behave like a zombie, thrilling the spectators.*

*This act was decreed illegal in recent times, for the spectator’s faith in ‘zombies’ and superstition increased. Yet, it was secretly performed in remote villages.*

*Ganesh was offered a huge sum of money to perform this act and frighten Sumo to death.*

*But now the half-breed was bodily harming Sumo. The arsehole could lead them to the gallows. For now, there would be circumstantial and physical evidence. They had put together everything too well, too convincingly. It was now their turn to feel frightened.*

*Weeks before they had rehearsed every bit of the plan; Ganesh going through his slow-moving walk, the scary talks in the room, and the transformation of Shan as he picked up the corpse. Also Ganesh’s role of shutting down the electric power and the van... Now their well-laid plan was falling apart.*

They waited for some time, afraid their presence might harm their aim. However, curiosity got the better of them. They swept the terrain below with their flashlight, ultimately stopping the light on the van. The shattered window showed the limp form of Sumo inside.

As soon as the focused light moved away, *Sumo raised his head and smiled diabolically at nobody in particular!*

They heard the same slow, dragging footsteps. With it was the fetid odor of decaying flesh. Shan shone the flashlight down*. It was Ganesh.*

6. Marketing Murder - Encountering *It*

 “What the fuck did you do, arsehole?” yelled Shan, aiming the flashlight on Ganesh like an artiste in the strobe light.

In abject fear, they stared at him. A streak of blood dripped from his forehead and chin. His lack of verbal response angered Shan.

“We warned you not to harm him bodily. Is that his blood?” Shan took him to task. “Why the fuck did you break the window?”

Ganesh continued his nonchalant walk. The slow dragging of his feet. He vacantly walked ahead. And the overpowering stench of rotten flesh hung in the air.

“You can shut that act down, now, you fool,” Shan ordered.

Ganesh did not pay attention and crept towards him. The Caribbean’s face was clearly visible. They gasped in fear. *The complete sclera of his eyes was like black obsidian rock!* Gone were his pupils and the whites of his eyes. Now there were pitch black.

“Stop it,” he repeated, panic rising in his voice.Mustering all courage, he repeated, “Stop there!” This time, unable to hide the panic.

Suddenly he realized Narayan was quiet, too quiet. “Narayan, tell him to stop,” he ordered.

Narayan stood there, still as if a piece of furniture.

All of a sudden Shan whipped out a pistol and laughed harshly “Damn Bastards…! I am not Sumo to be scared. I came prepared. Stop it or I’ll shoot.”

Unheeded, Ganesh continued towards him. The pistol spat lead with a brilliant flame. It hit Ganesh, but the man never flinched. He shot another two rounds, but Ganesh continued towards him.

“Blanks!” He yelled in frustration. “You did me good, Narayan, you son of a bitch!” In almost a nerve reflex, he squeezed the trigger. The pistol exploded, and a bullet blasted into Narayan.

The man screamed and went down like an empty sack.

In a flash Shan realized he was not dealing with Ganesh but a zombie or whatever supernatural thing it was. *It* lunged at him.

Shan threw the pistol at Ganesh in anguish. *It* moved slightly, missing the hurled missile. Shan dodged his outstretched hand and raced up the staircase.

*Somewhere along the con artist had been transformed into a soulless corpse - a zombie*! Reckoned Shan.

He raced up like a lunatic until a barred door confronted him. He braced himself and smashed into the door with his shoulder. The door shuddered but remained barred. Once again, he bulled into the door. However, it remained sturdy. From below, he could hear dragging footsteps.

*It was getting closer;* he realized in panic.

Suddenly, strength was born out of desperation. The next time he hit the door, it flew open. He raced out and found himself on the roof of the bungalow. Quickly, he bolted whatever was left of the door. He looked frantically for a place to hide. There were plenty, a large storage water tank, scraps of iron, heaps that were barely discernible in the dark.

He ran for the tank. It was mounted on low cement blocks. He crawled under it, flattening himself to the ground, and waited.

Soon, very soon, he consoled himself; whatever was after him would go away by sunrise. It would be a matter of hours. Tomorrow, he would hand himself to the law. Tonight, he had to live.

He cursed the moment he had stepped into this place. Suddenly, the silence of the night was assaulted. It sounded like an explosion. Wood and metal shrapnel rained on the floor. *It* had broken the door. *It* had come for him. He had to remain quiet.

The slow dragging feet sounded loud in the silent night. With it came the nauseating odor of rotten flesh. *It* came closer, then went another way and nearly disappeared. To reappear near the tank, he could see its bare feet. He tightly cupped his mouth to stifle a scream.

As he watched in terror, drops of fresh blood dripped near *its’* feet. *Fresh blood, from where?* He wondered. Now he could smell the foul odor, the stench of death and blood and rotting flesh. Clumsily, *it* went away.

For a moment, it tempted him to arise and make a break for the door, but better sense prevailed. No matter what happened, he had to wait, relax himself. He could not let panic take control of him. He had to stick to sanity. As long as he remained silent, it would not know where he hid. He was safe. Concentrate on something, anything, he told himself.

Something came rolling under the tank, with a dull scraping sound. Moving towards him in an erratic manner, unlike a ball. It stopped inches before him. Reluctantly, he felt it. It was soft, mushy and…hairy. It oozed a warm liquid on his hand. Within seconds, he realized *it was a human head!*

*Was it a decapitated human head?* The stench it emitted was unbearable.All Narayan’s and his made-up tales had come true. They should not have buried the live with the dead. Now Ganesh was transformed into the undead.

*The lifeless eyes stared back at him*.

Fear caused him to empty his bladder in his jeans.

With a maniacal scream, he threw away the head and rolled out of his narrow confines.

*It* stood grinning diabolically at him and lunged at him. Shan dodged it, ran to the edge of the terrace, still screaming he flung himself into the empty space.

He hit the tarmac with a thud that drowned the sound of his shattering bones. He lay there writhing in pain.

*It* walked to the edge of the roof, watched the crumpled fresh corpse of the youth.

7. Marketing Murder - The Fateful Past

Ganesh continued his clumsy gait, reached the stairs, and bounded gleefully down. Near the first floor, he met the injured and whimpering Narayan; he ignored him.

Out in the open, he faced the shattered van. The van door slowly opened and Sumo emerged.

“How did it work?”

“Just as we planned. Narayan is dying and Shan has jumped off the roof!” a jubilant Ganesh answered.

They did a high five. “Dump that shitty stink!” Sumo barked.

“This *stink* mainly did the job.”

“Get fuckin’ rid of all the fuckin’ evidence, fast.”

*The duo, Narayan and Shan, had plotted the murder of Sumo, enlisting Ganesh as the major cog. But little did they know Ganesh worked in plays prior to giving life-endangering stunts for his livelihood. Besides, in his struggling days, Sumo had provided him with a few decent breaks. After all, Sumo was a brilliant writer, director and actor.*

*The offer the scheming duo put to Ganesh was tempting; he would earn a quick load. It pleased him, but the victim’s identity displeased him. Loyalty awoke in him, he contacted Sumo. Besides, the filthy rich fatso would pay him in hefty euros.*

*It was enough to set Sumo’s devilish mental wheels clicking.*

*If the two Dumbos, Narayan and Shan, could plot his death, he could do much better! He would turn the hunter into the hunted. Taking Ganesh into confidence, Sumo hatched up a plot. Something that would start where the scheming duo would end.*

*So, Sumo played along, the cowardly yellow-livered guy. Cringing and quaking with every fearful act. A perfect actor. He followed their script to the tee, which culminated in the van.*

*According to the duo’s script, Ganesh was to be transformed into a zombie in accordance with the legend. This meant creating enough fear psychosis to kill Sumo, using terror as the only tool. No physical harm was the pedestal the entire plot centered on.*

*Sumo’s script did exactly that. With the able help of Ganesh, he could execute it. Two days before the quartet could arrive; Ganesh had made a trip to this forsaken place. He had carried with him five specific props-a bulletproof vest, a papier mâché-seeming like a human head complete with hair, a live cat, a can of red paint made of cornstarch and red edible food coloring used in scenes to duplicate blood and lastly dark obsidian sclera.*

*These articles he stuffed in a trunk and hid it near the bungalow, but not before slitting the cat’s throat.After this, he returned to the scheming duo in subservience in the city. Once again, he immersed himself in the duo’s script.*

*Back on the forsaken land, the duo had purposefully dug the grave partially for Ganesh’s easy exit. Shan had feigned the panic-attack to keep the grave shallow.*

*Ganesh was supposed to climb out and enact as a zombie and frighten Sumo to death without physical violence. He had to come back into the room and stain the bed with mud. But according to Sumo’s script, he was to act like the real undead and pretend to kill Sumo in the van, thereby turning the fear psychosis on the duo.*

*So when Ganesh climbed out of the grave, his first task was to create the ‘corridor horror effects’ dragging feet, cigar smoke, door slamming, muddy imprints, which he quickly did.*

*He retrieved the hidden trunk. Donned the bulletproof vest under his clothes, tied the papier mâché with the putrefying cat’s corpse in it to the back of his waist and smeared his face with a few dabs of red paint. The sclera gave the perfect finish!*

*Final act; shutting the power off.*

*Thus, attired, he went about feigning the murder of Sumo. Then began his well-rehearsed slow walk of the zombie towards the duo.*

*Just as reckoned by Sumo, more than Ganesh’s appearance, the fetid odor of decaying flesh would cause fear psychosis. It convinced the duo that they were dealing with the undead. Later, came his blood dabbed face and his vacant sclera look.*

*Getting panicky, Shan had whipped out the pistol and shot Ganesh. The bulletproof vest did its job. Luckily, Shan targeted the upper torso.*

*Believing Narayan was a double crosser, Shan had shot him.*

*Sumo had anticipated this move, for there was little trust between the duo. One was sure to mistrust the other. Some fatality would ensue and the other would be implicated for it.*

*But to Sumo’s fortune Shan had committed suicide, it could not have ended better. Now his story to the police would be that a quarrel had broken out between the duo. Shan, being short-tempered, shot Narayan, later in remorse, had made him commit suicide. Ganesh would be there to back up his story.*

*Everything had gone according to the script. Now it was time to clear all the evidence. Narayan was the vital one.*

8. Marketing Murder - The Ideal Revenge

Together, they entered the building. Sumo moved his flashlight around. Narayan lay sprawled on the stairs, a gaping wound in his belly. His breathing sounded harsh. Their footsteps awoke him.

His eyes opened weakly. He saw Sumo and softened. Before he could say a word, his sight fell on Ganesh. Fear replaced pain. He knew he was conned.

At the end of the stairs, the pistol lay. Sumo whipped out his kerchief and picked up the pistol.

“Please…help …bro…I …hurting like hell…” gasped Narayan.

The reflected light in Sumo’s glasses glinted evilly.He turned the pistol to him. Narayan tried to cringe towards the corner. Without another word, he squeezed the trigger. Its echo resounded violently in the building.

The bullet blew a part of his neck.Narayan slumped to one side, dead.

Leaving the corpse, they hurried to the roof.From above Sumo shone the flashlight on the ground below.Until it stopped on the crumpled form of Shan. He hoped he was dead.

“Hurry, find the damn papier mâché and the freakin cat!” He ordered, swinging the light all over.

Ganesh hurried towards the water tank under which he rolled papier mâché some time ago.

From beneath, something glared at them. *A vacant pair of eyes was watching them with disdain!*

It was the papier mâché head lying on its side.

“Get the damn thing… quickly!” Sumo ordered in a shaky voice.

A horrible cry shot through the silent night.

The two visibly shook. They stopped moving. Both knew why.

*It sounded like Shan!*

They hurried to the edge of the roof. Sumo’s flashlight doing an erratic pattern on the ground below.

*Shan’s body was nowhere!*

Sumo looked worriedly at Ganesh.

“A wild cat could have dragged it away…” Ganesh answered through a dry mouth.

It somewhat pleased Sumo. More evidence destroyed before the police came.

But the unholy cry had left him with an uncanny feeling.

“Get the stuff and let’s go…” urged Sumo hoarsely.

Grabbing the props, they hurried down the stairs, eager to leave the accursed building. Ganesh in the fore, Sumo puffing behind.

Reaching the first floor, Ganesh abruptly stopped. “Sumo…” he simply stammered.

Sumo nearly collided with his broad back, but the fear in his voice really stilled him.

Ganesh was pointing to the bloodstains on the stairs.

It took Sumo long moments to realize what he meant.

*The corpse of Narayan was gone!*

It was impossible. Narayan was dead, that was certain. He could not have walked out. Probably an animal had dragged him away. He swept his light on the bloodstains trail.

The trail stopped abruptly. This only meant one thing: Narayan was bodily carried out. Once again, his mental wheels began clicking. Besides, Ganesh only Shan had the physique to bodily haul someone of Narayan’s stature.

They had reached the ground floor and stepped out into the open. The night had grown chilly.

“I will get the trunk.” Ventured Ganesh, his voice sounded like an echo.

“I will come with you…” Sumo offered. He did not want to be left alone.

The trunk was hidden some distance away from the van. After putting all the evidence in the trunk, Ganesh loaded it into the vehicle.

As he began to turn, a metallic click sounded loud in the silent night. He knew what it meant. Then came the sound of pulling back the hammer. He cautiously turned around.

Sumo stood with the pistol pointing to him. “How much are they paying to doublecross me, Darkie?”

“Sumo sir, you are getting it all wrong. I’m always faithful to you.”

“You bloody fuckin son of a bitch! Who is alive? Shan? Did he commit suicide or was that all a ruse? Where are they? Tell me or I’ll blow your fuckin’ brains out of your poop head! I swear!” He fearfully looked around, as if expecting the unexpected.

“Mother fucking swine! Cut the lousy crap. Narayan is certainly dead he couldn’t have walked out. He had to be carried…you and Shan could have done it. You were with me all the while that leaves Shan…Did he jump or did you lie…are they some more goons… fuckin’ speak up?” Once again, he looked fearfully around.

Ganesh could see the madness dancing in his eyes. Bloodlust had made him crazy. He could easily kill.

Suddenly Sumo gave a guttural laugh. “Here they come!” He shouted like a lunatic.

In a moment, Ganesh heard the heavy dragging sound of footsteps behind him.

Before he could turn, Sumo squeezed the trigger.

The bullet ripped through his arm. Hot, searing pain surged.

Without a thought, he bulled into Sumo, dropping him to the ground. Effortlessly, he wrenched the pistol from his chubby hands, pinning him to the ground.

“Sumo sir…” Ganesh began, aiming the pistol at his face.

But Sumo’s eyes were wide with fear, looking over Ganesh’s shoulder.

Ganesh was suddenly aware of the fetid odor of decaying flesh, strong, overpowering. He felt a sudden red-hot iron pain in his bullet wound. With an animalistic roar, he rolled away from Sumo.

In a quick tumble, he was on his knees, ready to face the attacker who had antagonized his wound.

Towering over the fallen Sumo were two figures. They seemed vague yet familiar. They were more like apparitions. Their attire appeared to be rustic, almost from the British era. They seemed to stand tall, yet hunched and very aged.The skin had a sickly gray look; head a lot abnormal to the body, the hair on the head was scant.

One of them bended over and made a grab at Sumo’s chest. The scream from the fallen man was heart wrenching. It was like the last cry of Shan they heard a few minutes ago. Sumo struggled a bit and then went still.

One of the apparitions held up an object. Dark liquid dripped from it. In a moment, he realized it was *Sumo’s heart.*

The two apparitions looked up at Ganesh. In the weak light of the night, the sight he saw paralyzed him with fear.

*They were indeed Shan and Narayan!* Only they seemed very aged and looked hideous. Their eyes were vacant spaces and black, uneven teeth jutted out from peeling dark lips. Scant and scraggly hair fell across their faces, shadowing them further. Blood smeared their chest and where the heart was supposed to be was an empty space.

Ganesh instantly realized that something unholy had happened to the two. They had been transformed into something supernatural…something undead, exactly as the legend had foretold.

Ganesh rose to his feet to flee, but fell back to the ground. All around him, such beings surrounded him. They were slowly coming towards him; he knew he could not escape them.

Slowly, the creatures were upon him, tearing him alive like wild dogs on their prey.

9. Marketing Murder - Epilogue

*The Spirits of the Ancient Dead had transformed Shan and Narayan into the living dead. They had made them cast off their life form to become one of their innumerable slaves. Wrenching out their life in the most brutal and painful manner, and now they were in their control.*

*They were the unfortunate cursed lot trapped in the world of the living, akin to an injured animal waiting to strike back. These had lain harmless like the soil until the living desecrated them, when a living being was buried alive on their ground.*

*The undead first made sure that the ones that desecrated them were punished. They had created Shan and Narayan into slaves from the living and used it as a tool for punishment. Also, they knew the pain and anguish of lurking as spirits, in the land of the living, infinitely.*

*To prevent any others from joining them. They had commanded their slave to wrench out the hearts of the freshly dead.*

 *Now these four youths would no longer lurk in the living world as the Spirits of the Ancient Dead had. To be tortured and abused every time they were desecrated. They wished to escape to their own kind. But this would be only when their last rites were performed according to the religious rituals. Until then, as long as the living desecrated them, they would reap revenge again and again till eternity.*

***Man is dust and dust he will return to.***

***Death brings man to dust.***

***Dust is death.***

***Death is dust.***

***And it was believed that the living and the dead should never be rested together***

THE MOKEN PROPHECY

1. The Moken Prophecy - The Shaman’s Warning

**Merigui Archipelago, Myanmar, June 1984.**

Off the Andaman Sea, Ahata Island, one of the innumerable small islands scattered close to the Myanmar mainland, a Moken tribal ritual was in progress.

Rain beat down on sea and land in curtains. It was the wet season of the monsoon. Ferocious waves, a metre and a half high, battered the coast. On the high ground, away from the raging sea, was a shelter built on stilts of wood, bamboo and pandanus leaves.

A similar, but silent storm was raging inside the shelter.

The Moken shaman studied the blood clotted entrails with the gentleness of a surgeon. He was somber when he spoke minutes later. Light from the torch fire glistened in the sweat of his face and blood on his fingers. It was evident the shaman was shaken up by his own words. It made his dark, gaunt face look even more sallow.

The words brought stillness in the shelter. The Moken men gathered there grew grim. Silence reigned. The steady beat of the rain and occasional thunderclaps outside sounded ominous. The shadows cast by the torchlight were the only things that stirred.

Matu, in particular, felt a chill in his heart. The shaman’s words were the *dismal prediction* of his unborn child. He was here to seek favors from the ancestors for the child and predict its future.

Matu was to have his second child after a span of ten years. But all he got was terrible news. His sight shifted to the turtle lying before the crossed-legged seated shaman. He had captured the turtle alive for the ritual of sacrifice and future prediction. It symbolized all female forms-especially women giving birth.

The turtle lay on its shell; it’s under side cut out with a knife. Blood and entrails were spilling from the open gash. The fore pair of flippers feebly moved. And its glassy eyes oozed a mucus-like liquid every time it blinked pitifully. He instantly felt connected to the pain of the creature.

The shaman once again dug his blood-stained fingers into the turtle’s entrails. For a moment or two, he searched inside and then withdrew his fingers. More gore and entrails spilled out. This time he prescribed a minor remedy for the *dismal prediction*, difficult but not impossible.

In the center of the shelter was a wooden totem, hand carved and painted. It had the head of a shark. It’s wide mouth gaping open, exposing rows of serrated teeth. The shark’s head continued with a body of a man. This half-shark, half-man, held a harpoon in one hand and a hook in the other.

The shaman quickly offered the dying turtle to their Shark-God. The shark was the only creature the Moken feared at sea. He stoked herbs into a smoldering fire, creating pungent smoke. Gathering a few smoldering herbs, he began to encircle the totem. In a slow droning voice, he recited a few incantations. He blew the pungent smoke in the four directions, then skywards and earthwards.

Moments later, he ordered the dead creature to be buried in the sand. It was puzzling for the Moken. The shaman was supposed to feed on the freshly sacrificed turtle, especially the head, flippers and blood.

He explained—it was bad to feed on the turtle, for the sacrifice had brought an ill-omen for the Moken. He also ordered all the edibles that were prepared for the revelry later on, to be thrown away.

Obediently, the men carried out the dead turtle to be buried. Baskets of rice flour cakes, roasted sandworms, sea snails and oysters meant for the revelry were buried with the turtle. Even a fermented drink prepared from honey to be served as a beverage was poured into the sand.

Reluctantly, one by one, the men left. Matu was the last to leave. Just as he moved away, he heard the yapping of wild dogs. They had come to feed on the buried turtle. For one last time, he looked at the totem-pole. The shark-man seemed to grin at him evilly. As he walked homewards, he sincerely wished his child would be born dead.

Late next morning, the child was born. It was a boy. The shaman named him Phut. With fear in his heart, Matu received the news. His elder child, Tiga, a boy of ten, sat beside him wondering why his father appeared so disturbed.

The shaman did not disclose to Matu another bit of bad news relating to his son. During the night, a very strange thing had occurred. The wild dogs of the island had dug out the buried turtle but had not even taken a bite of it. It was a very unlikely thing.

Wild dogs relish turtles’ flesh. They were known to hunt turtles when they came to the island beaches to lay eggs. Neither had they eaten the other eatables buried with it! For some weird reason had scattered it wildly on the beach. Even these beasts had rejected the sacrifice! Indeed, something was vile!

It was looked upon as a very ill omen by the Moken.

Secretly, the shaman had some men clear the beach. The dead turtle was weighed down with a stone and thrown back into the sea where it belonged.

2. The Moken Prophecy - Legend of the Sea Queen

**November 1991.**

The flotilla of *kabangs* drifted out to sea. Equipped to spend the next six dry months in open sea till the beginning of the wet seasons. A *kabang* is a small handmade wooden houseboat of the Moken. It has a low roof and is wide enough to shelter a mere four to five members. And a sail made of pandanus leaves.

Matu sat on the low stern as the *kabang* dipped and rose. Beside him, Tiga fished for dinner. From inside the *kabang*, childish laughter could be heard.

“Eat your food, Phut,” his mother ordered. “Don’t be a bad boy, or I’ll tell the shark to bite you.”

“No mother, I not eat! I can kill shark!” cried the child defiantly, “I not eat, first you tell a story!”

“Don’t talk like this, Phut!” his mother reprimanded him. “You are getting worse day by day!”

“Mother, I want to hear story!” he shrieked stubbornly. Crossing his arms, he stood before her in open defiance.

The boy was getting impossible with each passing day. And it was his father’s fault entirely. He never disciplined him nor did he let her do it. She never understood why. He had not been so with Tiga, their elder son.

“Which one do you want?” the mother asked resignedly.

“Queen Sibian!” was the child’s quick reply.

He was getting difficult. Matu sighed softly. No matter how many times Phut heard it, he was never satisfied. His mother always told it to him as a fairy tale. About a beautiful queen and a handsome king living in the sea and falling in love. It always had a happy ending.

But in reality, Queen Sibian had more significance in the life of the Moken. It was time Phut was told the truth of the Queen, instead of this romantic trash.

Probably if he had told his wife of Phut’s *dismal prediction,* she would never tell her son her version of the story. Nobody in the village knew about the prediction, except the shaman and the men gathered that fateful night.

Queen Sibian was an ancestral island queen. She was in love with a Moken tribesman. The Moken were considered lowly in rank and status, almost worthy of being her slave. But against all opposition, she married him. A few months later, she found her Moken husband making love to her younger sister.

Enraged, she laid a punishment on all the Moken society.

The entire Moken’s life cycle would be spent on the *kabang*. They would live and die in their *kabangs*. Just as the child’s umbilical cord was attached to the mother, the same way they would be attached to their *kabang* for their entire life. The shark would be their eternal predator.

However, later she relented. She permitted them to live for roughly three months on land during the wet months. The rest of the eight to nine months they were to live in their low-roofed *kabangs*, just like the turtle. And as the turtles remained connected to the land and sea, so would the Moken tribe.

In accordance with her punishment, the Moken had spent their lives for generations in the same fashion, untouched and unspoiled by civilization. The British, the Japs, the Dutch and the French came and left, but had no effect on them.

.It was only recently that things were changing.

Sails of pandanus leaves on *kabangs* were being replaced with plastic. *Kabangs* were also being motorized. The Moken were being trapped and caged like wild animals, thanks to the governments of Myanmar and Thailand.

The Myanmar government was trying to create a permanent Moken national park as a tourist attraction. The government of Thailand had done it and was successful. If it was so, the end of the Moken was imminent.

Also, his son’s *dismal prediction* could not be ignored. He often wondered if his son was somehow connected to Queen Sibian. He shuddered with the thought.

When he turned to look at his son, he was huddled in his mother’s lap. Listening wide eyed to her story while feeding on a stew of boiled fish, seaweeds and rice.

*Who would believe such an innocent child could bring so much disaster into the world of the Moken!*

3. The Moken Prophecy - Pirate Hunter

**April 1992.**

It was a late rainy afternoon when a trawler docked on the shore near the Moken settlement on Ahata Island. Its presence instantly created a flutter in the sleepy colony. Everyone recognized the trawler. It was a dirty, dingy kind of sea craft, but they knew it was trouble. They had nicknamed it Ghost-Boat. It looked like a ghost boat with nobody in sight. The craft simply docked there, its engine purring gently in the water.

The Headman of the Moken colony readied to meet the trawler. He could not dare to keep it waiting. This trawler was actually a disguised craft which belonged to the Burmese navy. Mainly used to catch or kill pirates rampant in these parts. But the trawler was now synonymous to a naval craft by pirates and others alike.

The Headman hurried out into the pouring rain and stood before the trawler. It was an entire minute before two naval ratings, toting sub-machine guns, appeared. A few moments later, Captain Foki appeared on the deck. Another sub-machine gun toting rating held an umbrella over his head.

Captain Foki was a Burmese naval captain whose duty was to clean the Andaman Seas of pirates. A scourge to these parts, and he did his job with a fierce dedication. It was known that he had a terrible hatred towards pirates. And viewed all pirates as personal enemies.

Captain Foki was a short, obese man with a pasty skin almost to the point of unhealthy yellowness.He was completely bald and had a head resembling a bowling ball. His eyebrows and mustache were wispy bits of hair. While his eyes were mere slits that completely disappeared into the folds of facial flesh whenever he laughed, which he did often. He perpetually stank of sweat, rice wine and fish.

The Captain drew his short structure on the deck with an effort. Seeing his gathered audience, he began laughing at nothing amusing. It rang with an unpleasant sound in the silent noon.

Barely containing his laughter, he focused on the Headman. “Seen any pirates recently, eh Headman?”

The Headman stood silent. Every Moken gathered there stood with their heads bowed. The only sound was that of the pouring rain.

“Still not seen…no pirates…? You damned Moken!” he chided. His eyes no longer held mirth. Now they were right on the Headman. “Are you all blind or are the pirates invisible?” He continued. “From where do you get your plastic for sails, oil to run your engines…rice to eat…?” Running a lascivious eye over one of the women nearby, he continued, “See this healthy one, she has fed well on rice and fish!” He ended chuckling with laughter.

The Headman waited patiently till his laughter subsided, then said. “We are honest men, Captain. We trade with all people…people those who wish to trade with us. We know no difference of a pirate from fisherman.”

Once again, the Captain’s eyes narrowed down on the Headman. “Do you really do not know pirates?”He saw the Headman wilt under his gaze. “I will show you pirates!” Turning to his men, he ordered. “Get the prisoners up here!” He looked at the Headman and began laughing. “I will show you pirates…real genuine pirates!”

Three men were brought up to the deck, bloody and blindfolded. Their hands were bound behind and their feet were bare and bloodied. They were dragged off the trawler onto the beach.

Part of the gathered group began to leave the place. Captain Foki grabbed a sub-machine gun and fired in the air. “Stay!” The captain ordered. “Children and women in the front!Let them see what I do to pirates and their well-wishers. No trial…no imprisonment...direct death!”

Another burst of sub-machine gunfire shattered the air. Reluctantly, the children and women shifted in the front.

The struggling pirates were booted, punched and bound to trees. “Now watch this!” He rubbed his hands in glee as his naval ratings kneeled, aiming their guns at the pirates. “This happens to pirates and traitors of our country. Shoot!” He ordered.

A quick burst of sub-machine gunfire erupted, killing the pirates instantly and shattering the silence of the beach.

Slowly, the sound died down to be replaced by muffled sobs.

The captain walked around the corpses, as if surveying his work of art. Now bloodied and dangling lifelessly from the trees. “This will happen to each one of you if you protect the pirate dogs.”

As he turned to head to his trawler, he stopped and turned. “For your ignorance, eh, Headman, your colony will have to pay. I will take this one.” He grabbed a woman’s arm and burst out laughing. Turning to his men, he said. “Lads, take your pick miserly. We can always share them, sows. Keep some for the Moken national park… the government tourist attraction.”

He stopped before the Headman. Keeping his hold on the struggling woman, he said. “And lads shoot anyone who comes in the way.” Dragging her, he took her on the trawler and addressed the gathering. “Ah Moken Filth! The next time I pass this way, I will send them, sows, back to you. But I want to see the pirates' rotting skeletons dangling from these trees just as I left them. Make no mistake to bury them. I want the other pirate dogs to see their kind....Rot! What fun it will be!”

With that, the trawler left the island, leaving behind only grief, pain and death.

4. The Moken Prophecy - Hunter Hunted

**October, 1994.**

Phut sat on the floor in his shelter and wept. He had been crying all morning. His companions and friends were going diving to hunt in the shallows. Only he was forbidden by his father to join them. It was unfair.

The Moken colony, docked on an island, was a beehive of activity. Soon, the dry season would begin, and the nomadic Moken would be back to their seafaring life. The men worked on the last moment repairs of the *kabangs*. While the women, in preparation for their four months at sea.

That left the little girls and boys. The girls beach-combed for many shells to be used in barter. And the little boys were sent out as divers to hunt in the shallows.

They were encouraged to go out diving and swimming. At times, they were even coerced to do so. After all, these little boys were the future of the Moken. It was unimaginable for a Moken male not to be an expert in this art.

Hearing the excited chatter of his friends, Phut climbed to his knees and watched through the slit of his shelter. His friends were gathered on the beach. They were all ready to go diving, to hunt in the shallows.

Every time he went diving with his friends, he was accompanied either by his father or brother. While the other boys came unaccompanied. In the beginning, he thought nothing of it, but recently it was becoming embarrassing. He felt like a cripple or a retard, even though he was the best diver and swimmer among all his friends.

His companions said nothing, but he knew behind his back they sniggered. He wondered why they never teased him or even picked a fight with him. It was very unusual. Maybe it was the fear of his father or brother.

More tears streamed from his eyes at the thought. He watched his friends laugh and boast before the hunt. He knew what the topic was: *the dare.*

The *dare* was, as usual-who could bag the biggest prey. This meant fish, mollusks, crab, oysters, or maybe the odd eel or ray. Each carried rattan baskets with lids for the purpose. They pulled down their traditional goggles. This eyewear was wooden, hand-carved, fitted with glass and sealed with tree sap.

Suddenly, an idea occurred to him. Maybe he could slip out for the hunt and return before his father realized. He grabbed his goggles and his rattan basket. Cautiously, he slipped out and looked around.

The entire colony was busy at work. Tiga was on the beach cleaning barnacles and algae from their *kabang*’*s* hull with a smoldering branch. Father and the other elders would be on the other side of the island, building *kabangs* for the young men who were to marry. It was a tradition that had been carried on for generations.

Stealthily, he raced for the sea, diving into it. At the late hour of the morning, the sea was more than tepid. He loved its feel against his skin as he began to swim towards the bottom. The aquamarine color of the sea never failed to delight him. Its transparency was such that the sea bed several meters below was visible. Coral reefs of every hue decorated the bottom. Dark green forest of seaweeds waved as he swam by. Shoals of fish of every type darted by him.

His friends had spread out in the forest of seaweed, hunting for prey. Quickly, he joined them. A while later, he had found nothing. He came up for a breath of air. Above, he surveyed the place. His brother was still working on the *kabang*. It would not be long before he would finish the job.

Hunting in the shallows was time consuming; the real prey was out in the open sea. But they were forbidden from swimming in the open sea for the fear of sharks.

But today Phut had another agenda. Capture a prize catch and return home as soon as possible. Maybe his father would treat him with more respect. *Could he slip out of the shallows?* *A few metres away from the shallows would hardly make a difference?* This thought made him even more determined.

Taking a long, deep breath, he swiftly ducked under the water. Kicking his legs frog-like, he dived away from the shallows. Leaving his companions far behind.

Out of the sanctuary of the shallows, everything changed. The sea had lost its delicate aquamarine color; it grew less transparent. Diffused sunlight filtered through the water, cutting down visibility. The sea bed had deepened and grown rocky. Everything looked alien to him.

Far in the distance, behind him, he could faintly discern the figures of his companions swimming about. It meant he was not too far from the shallows. Quickly, he began searching the rocks for prey before he ran out of breath.

It was soon he sighted a rock crab, the size of a dinner plate. It would indeed be a prize catch. But Phut knew he would have to be careful of the creature’s pincers. It could inflict a sharp wound or even break a bone. Slowly, he encircled it.

Unknown to him, a far better hunter was scouring the rocky seabed, too. It was at least two feet longer and weighed several pounds more than Phut. It had zeroed down on a prey, the very same one that the little boy had sighted: the rock crab.

In a quick action, Phut grabbed the rock crab. Instantly, the hunter shot out from its crevice. Propelling its body forward with a burst of speed.

He placed the prey in his rattan basket and swam towards the shallows. It was then he felt a sharp tug at the basket. He turned to see, sure that his basket had snagged some place. To his horror, he saw a dark shadow descend upon him. It took him a moment to realize the shadow was an octopus. Two of its arms had grabbed his basket; the other six were reaching out for him.

Fear gripped him. He powered all his strength into his little muscles and swam. He only hoped to reach the shallows. But the powerful creature was in no mood to relent. It wrapped its arms around the basket even tighter and weighed down Phut.

The little boy struggled to get away. He began feeling the creature’s arms slowly wrap around him. One arm went across his face. Another went around his chest. He began to feel the suckers on the creature’s arm grip his naked skin, one by one. His lungs burned for air and every muscle ached. He was tiring with every effort. But he kept swimming towards the shallows.

Phut’s companions hunted in the shallows but always had an eye on the open seas. The shark was a wily creature. They were busy hunting when one of them sighted an abnormal lump drifting towards the shallows. The young hunting party broke up in panic. All of them fleeing to the surface.

Some of them managed to discern the lump. A human trapped by an octopus. On the surface, they were out of the waters like penguins at the sight of a sea leopard. Once on the beach, the alarm was sounded.

Tiga was the first to leap into the water, followed by other young men. When he reached the spot, he was aghast to see what looked like an octopus feeding off the poor victim’s back.

Though octopuses never feed on humans, nevertheless they are neither kind to them. Without a thought, he swam towards the two. Grabbing an arm of the creature, he tried to pry it from the victim. But it would not budge; instead, another arm snaked around Tiga’s neck. He could feel the suckers trying to grip him. The creature would not get him so easily.

Twisting quickly, he yanked off the arm. Just then, he felt another arm probing at him. But he was quick to avoid it.

Suddenly, the creature let go of him as well as the victim. A moment later it crawled away, gripping the rock crab in an arm.

The victim lay on his face, motionless. It seemed like a young boy. About the age of his younger brother. A torn rattan basket rocked gently on his back. Tiga realized the octopus was really after the rock crab in his basket. He turned the body around and was shocked! Phut was lying absolutely still. Grabbing him in his arms, he quickly kicked to the surface.

5. The Moken Prophecy - Queen Sibian Comes To Life

Phut stirred to the gentle murmur all around him. He was aware of his family, especially his mother. She was whimpering. Then there was the shaman, the elders, the young men... practically the entire colony had gathered!

Phut remembered his disobedience. He swore silently and was sure to get a public hiding. Seeing him revive, the colony began to disperse.

When he was alone, his father came and sat beside him. Running a gentle hand through his hair, he said, “Phut, promise me you will never do this again.”

The boy could not believe his ears. *No scolding? No public hiding?* He tried to sit up, but felt his body ache. “Ah Father,” he said, “Had Tiga not interfered, I would have brought you fresh octopus meat!”

Outside on the beach, Tiga sat with the old shaman. A gloom of silence prevailed between them. The old man had just revealed Phut’s *dismal and terrifying prediction.* The secret was supposed to be shared only among the elders. And he had not even attained manhood. By doing so, the shaman had also initiated him into manhood. He would also be the youngest boy to do so.

 His heart was greatly troubled as he watched the sunset.

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**January 1995.**

True to his word, the old shaman found a marriageable girl for Tiga. He fixed a date for the two families to meet. The girl, Mipi and her family lived on an island called Boru Island, an hour or two, ride from Tiga’s colony, Ahata Island. So on the appointed day, accompanied by the shaman, they went to see Mipi.

While the elders and Tiga met and spoke in one of the shelters, Phut roamed the island. It was no different from his island, only bigger and greener. He sauntered along the beach till he came upon a group of girls playing under one of the shelters. They were about his age, enacting some sort of game.

Phut stopped and watched them. One of the girls took his fancy. Engrossed in their game, he barely realized when he settled on the sand. Their game continued for a while until his presence was discovered. The game instantly stopped, and the girls stood and watch the newcomer. For a few moments, they dumbly stared at him.

Embarrassed, he took a step forward. “Greetings, I am Phut of Ahata Island.” He addressed them the way he had seen his father and other elders do.

The islander girls still watched him, expressionlessly. He was wondering what would get them out of their stupor when the girl of his fancy stepped forward. “Welcome to our island of Boru…” she said demurely.

Phut felt his heart beat wildly. She was the most beautiful girl he had ever seen. She had a chubby oval-shaped face, with a mop of dark, short silken hair. Her eyes, even though mere slits, were wide and innocent. Her skin was smooth and the color of dark honey. Dressed in a soiled, weather-faded floral gown, she looked far better than a princess to Phut.

“Phut, have you come here to trade?” She asked after running an eye on his fine clothes.

“No…no” Phut stammered. “I am here to… see a girl…a wife…”

“Do all the boys of Ahata Island marry so young?” She began to giggle. And her friends joined her.

She looked truly cute when she giggled. “I am…sorry. I am here to see a girl…Mipi, a wife for… my elder brother…Tiga.” Now he was thoroughly shamed faced with his stammering.

“Ah Niti!”She turned to one of her friends. “This is one of the guests who were to see your sister, Mipi.”

The girl named Niti slapped a hand on her forehead. “I had promised mother to help her before the guests arrived.” With that she began running towards the cluster of shelters.

“Wait, we will help you!” The-girl-of-Phut’s-fancy said, as she followed Niti.

Phut watched in bewilderment as the girls raced after Niti. It pained to see them go. He wished they had waited and spoken to him. Especially that beautiful girl in the floral gown. He had a lot to tell her. Hear her heady giggle. How desperately he wanted her to stay back. Longing to know all about her.

He looked in despair at the girls running across the beach. Damn it! Not knowing where she lived or her name… “Wait!” He suddenly yelled, running after the girls. They had reached halfway to their shelters.

Only the girl in the floral gown turned. “What?” She asked, her bosom rising and falling with the effort of running.

For a few moments, no words came to Phut’s aid. He simply watched her, enamored by her sight.

“What is it Phut? I don’t have all day.”

“At least tell me your name?” He literally begged.

Once again, she threw her head back and giggled. “My name is Sithayu.” She turned and fled.

“Sithayu…” He muttered. “Sithayu…”

‘Sithayu’ sounded so much like Queen Sibian. For all he knew, he had seen his Queen Sibian in flesh and blood.

6. The Moken Prophecy - Pirates of the High Seas

**April 1996.**

The flotilla of *kabangs* was coming to dock for the monsoons. A mile before the island, a couple of fast powered trawlers greeted them. The crafts seem to be waiting for them. Raggedly dressed men of every origin, from Burmese to Thai to Malay, crowded the craft. All armed with rifles and country made pistols. Some even carried the broad Chinese fighting sword at their waist.

The Moken instantly recognized them. *Pirates of the high seas!* Unlike their predecessors, they rarely robbed ships. Nowadays they were into gun-running, kidnapping, smuggling drugs, fuel oil, electronic goods, and antiques …anything for a profit.

The flotilla came and stopped beside the trawlers. A tallish man wearing a rattan hat, a worn out T-shirt and stained jeans emerged. At his waist was slung a country-made pistol. His face was weathered and several weeks old beard grew on his cheeks. He was the chief of the pirates. Everyone called him Chief Po. He was also the lifeline of the Moken to civilization.

A smile broke on his face as he spoke. “Welcome, my sea turtles! What treasures have you got for me?”

 The Moken men instantly hurried to fetch their goods of trade. Shells of snails and turtles, coral and dried fish were brought out. Chief Po was particularly interested in oyster pearls, captured live octopus or exotic fish or antique-bits of ship wreckage. These last three items had a quick and open sale on the black market.

This time, Chief Po was in luck. One of the Moken men had discovered a handful of coins and some trinkets in the ocean depths. He was more than delighted. The Chief thanked him profusely and distributed candy among the children. He knew most of the kids by their names. When he came to Phut, he tousled his hair lovingly. “How are you, my little Octopus?” Phut’s encounter with the octopus was famous.

Soon the coral, fish, shells and antiques exchanged hands. In return, the Moken were provided with rice, diesel, plastic and radio transistors. All the goods necessary for their means to survive.

With the exchanged done, the pirates were on their way. And the Moken, satisfied, were back to preparing for the fierce months of the monsoon.

**October 1996.**

When Phut woke up, it was early. The sun had not yet risen. But the excitement in his heart prevented him from sleeping. It was a strange excitement; he had never felt before. Today Tiga was to marry Mipi on Buro Island. He was going to meet Sithayu, his Queen Sibian. He waited till dawn, then quickly got ready for the trip. It seemed like hours before his family awoke. And some more before they were finally ready to leave. The old shaman’s late arrival irritated Phut.

An hour or two after Matu’s family departed, the dreaded trawler docked on the shore. Ghost boat! Panic spread through the Moken settlement on Ahata Island.

The Headman instantly ordered. “Tell the young women not to come!”

Reluctantly, the inhabitants trooped on the beach to pay obedience, with their blood or flesh.

This time Captain Foki did not wait to put on his grand appearance. He was on the deck, parading around in impatience. He seemed livid, his eyes mere slits.

Without his characteristic laugh, he began screaming. “You Moken Dogs! Did I not tell you not to trade with the pirates? Are you stupid like the turtles you eat? Maybe you did not understand the lesson I had taught you the last time I was here!”

The Headman stepped forward. “Captain….Sir, I promise you we had no deal with pirates…!”

Before the Headman could complete his sentence, the captain was at his throat. A pistol jabbed against it. “Don’t lie to me, you son of a sow! Just a pull of the trigger and I can end your filthy life!”

“I promise you Captain….Sir…You are mistaken! We haven’t seen any pirates!” begged the Headman, the whites of his eyes visible.

For a few moments, the captain did not move. Very slowly he released the trembling man and laughed. “Good, I believe you… you son of a sow!”Lazily, he turned to the gathering. For a moment, he studied them. “Ah! No women today, eh, Headman?”

Turning to his men, he ordered. “Go into the houses find the women! Bring everyone out!”

“Please, Captain, please...” pleaded the Headman.

But the Captain was unrelenting. “Don’t leave anyone. Even the children and old women! I will teach you…you human filth how to deny me sweet, soft woman flesh!”

“Phut, behave yourself, boy. No mischief today!” His father warned just as the *kabang* neared the beach. Yet, Phut was the first to jump out of the *kabang*, as it docked on the beach. If permitted, he would have swum all the way the moment the coastline of Buro was sighted.

Mipi emerged out from her shelter to greet Tiga’s family. She looked beautiful in a long gown. Ornaments made from tiny beach-shells adorned her neck and wrists. Dainty pink and blue blossoms bedecked her hair.

But Phut’s eyes sought for Sithayu. She was among the womenfolk. For a moment, their eyes met, and she smiled shyly. It was enough to send his heart pumping, faster. It pained him to see her dressed poorly. She wore an old worn out dress. No ornaments of beach-shell adorned her neck or wrists. No blossoms bedecked her hair.

*Why should only Mipi look beautiful? What was wrong with his Sithayu?* He thought angrily. In a flash, a thought occurred to him. If there was no one to care for his Sithayu, surely he was there! That meant getting into trouble. But where Sithayu was concerned, nothing was trouble.

The visitors were being ushered in. Taking advantage of this diversion, he slipped away.

Quickly, he headed for the forested cliff on the far side of the island. On his arrival, he had seen pink and blue blossoms on the cliff. If he could get them, they would look pretty in his Sithayu’ s hair. The thought spurred him. He raced towards the cliff.

High in the cliff, several pairs of hungry eyes watched his arrival in silence.

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Captain Foki’s men emerged from the shelters, dragging several children and women, squirming…screaming. A few angry grunts resounded from the gathered men.

Instantly, the Headman raised an arm to calm his men. Then he was at the captain’s feet. “Please, Captain, please...,” he begged. “They are innocent.”

The captain jerked his leg from the Headman’s grip, walked to a boulder and seated himself on it.

The women and children were dragged and thrown before him. Just as a few tried to arise; the captain had his pistol out. He fired a few rounds close to them, spraying dirt all over. The hapless ones immediately cowered under the gunfire.

Their discomfort brought instant laughter to him. Once again, he fired a few more rounds, this time dangerously close to them. This evoked an even deeper, raucous laughter from him.

Moments later, still sitting on the boulder, he wiped the laughter tears on his sleeve and holstered his gun.

He looked at the scared, whimpering humans sprawled before him, pleased. Just then, something caught his eye. He arose and walked through the sprawling bodies. Stopping before one of the women, he grabbed her by her arm and sat her up. His sight glued on to the necklace she wore. He bent and tore it from her neck. Holding it up, he looked at the gathered crowd and laughed derisively.

He looked directly at the anguished crowd and nodded knowingly. “Ah, you Moken swines! Now we will know about the filthy pirates!”Fun time was to begin now!

7. The Moken Prophecy - The Omen Begins

Every move of Phut was being observed. They would not attack until the victim was in striking range.

Phut was oblivious to the danger, although he had been constantly warned of them. *Never to enter the forest alone!* All the forested areas of this stretch of archipelago bore the same danger. But now all his senses were up in smoke. All he knew was that he had to get the blossoms for his Sithayu.

 A yard or two lay between him and the flowers, when he realized their presence. Eyes like shiny coals watching him. He looked around, realized they were at least six of them. He had seen how they could tear a man to pieces. But the temptation of taking the blossoms was too strong to ignore. Whether or not, he took it they were going to attack him; he reasoned to himself.

Slowly, he crept forward. They continued to watch him, their eyes not leaving him even for a moment. He plucked a few blossoms, turned and fled. Instantly, he heard several angry snarls. Saw their tawny and black fur. *Wild dogs!*

Phut ran as fast as he could. Dodging between the tree trunks of the slope. Had the cliff not been well forested, the wild dogs would have ran him down.

Now he was aware of their yapping behind him. A few had separated and were flanking him on either side. Also, the bottom of the cliff was nearing. After that was the huge stretch of open beach. It would be impossible to outrun them on the beach.

Even the cluster of shelters was too far to expect any help from them. Their fierce yapping was getting closer… more excited.

Fear filled his insides, forcing him to take larger strides. The two wild dogs flanking him were beginning to converge. Gripping the blossoms tightly, he desperately looked for an escape route.

Ahead, a thin strand of low trees remained…then the open beach. Death would come slowly and painfully. *He would be eaten up alive!*

The thought spurred him to run faster. A low branch brushed against him. It gave him an idea in a jiffy. Putting the blossoms tightly between his lips, he scanned the tree line ahead, selected one.

Before he reached it, he was hurling himself at the trunk. Without wasting a moment, he clambered up the trunk using all the dexterity of a primate.

Barely had he climbed a few feet up the trunk when the wild dogs gathered at the base of the tree. Snarling, they eyed him hungrily from below.

But all he was concerned about was that no damaged had come to the blossoms.

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“Do you still say you don’t deal with the filthy pirates?” Captain Foki dragged the woman by her hair and threw her at the Headman’s feet. Then he held up her necklace for all to see. It was made up of colored seashells and coins.

The gathered Moken instantly recognized the coins. Those were the same type of coins some of them had salvaged from the submerged ship’s wreckage a few months back. According to Moken law, all such precious salvaged items were to be traded away. Nothing was ever to be kept back by them.

With the captain’s next sentence, they knew it meant trouble. “Similar coins I found with the pirates I had killed last month! Now who wants to tell me how these coins reached the pirates?” The captain looked around at the gathered crowd with a smirk on his face. Lastly, he eyed the Headman.

When nobody answered, he said somberly, “I don’t have time for games. If nobody can tell me anything of importance, this woman will die.” He drew out his pistol. Placed a booted foot on her shoulder, pinning her to the ground. Keeping his eyes on the Headman, he aimed the weapon at her. “Last chance Headman!”

Before the Headman could react, he squeezed the trigger twice.

Cries erupted from the crowd, but one was louder than the rest. He turned in the direction. A young man was on his knees. His eyes glued on the woman at the captain’s feet. It was the woman’s brother.

“Ah! A true brother! The sow is not dead.” Captain Foki guffawed as he looked at the two bullet holes near his feet, still emitting smoke. “Come here!” He beckoned with his pistol.

The young man began to rise.

“On your knees…swine!” He ordered.

Just for a moment, the young man hesitated.

“Hurry up!” He dug his boot harder into the woman’s shoulder, making her squirm in pain. He watched the man move towards him on his knees. “Forget the pirates, you swine! You are going to take me to the place where you found these antiques.Retrieve it for me!”

The young man was near his sister, comforting her.

Ignoring them, the captain grabbed the woman by the arm and pushed her towards his men. “Take this sow, the longer he takes to retrieve the antiques… Do what you wish with her.”

With that, the captain headed to the trawler. While his men dragged the hapless struggling sister and brother.

The Moken watched with grief and pain as the trawler left the shore.

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The shaman was the first to notice the absence of Phut. His old rheumy eyes sought the child. Among the children, gathered elders, the revelers…

The boy was nowhere to be found. He immediately alerted Matu. Together, they went searching. Minutes later, he was nowhere. A dread grew over the men. The decade old prediction echoed in their mind. They shuddered to think of the consequences. It was time to put a stop to all revelry and alert the colony.

Phut had to be found at any cost!

Up in the tree, Phut was quick to realize the danger he was in. Below, the wild dogs leaped, snapping at his leg. Above, the trunk and the branches had grown thinner. Any higher, and the sapling-thin trunk would break, sending him plummeting among the hungry carnivores.

He bunched up and tried to make himself small. For now, he was safe, but he knew it would not last long. Their leaps were getting higher and more desperate.

A couple of times, he had even felt their warm breath against his leg. They were getting closer…very close. But he knew there was nothing he could do but to hang on to the trunk and wait for help. The only solace was that the blossoms were safely grasped in his mouth.

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The shaman, Matu and a few of the Moken men set out to search for Phut. Tiga joined them too; he could not stay and be a spectator. The search party dispersed in all directions.

Tiga along with two men, was first to realize Phut’s whereabouts. On the long stretch of the beach, he detected small-sized footprints, heading towards the cliff. Praying that he was right, he began following the footprints.

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Phut watched the wild dogs below. They had stopped leaping and had settled on their haunches. Even seemed relaxed, but they eyed him hungrily. Their numbers had increased.

All of a sudden, they stiffened and grew alert, looking in the same direction. He looked on, puzzled. Moments later, he heard footsteps. By the sound, he realized there were a couple of people. Phut’s heart soared with joy. Rescue at last!

Instinctively, a warning cry started to erupt from his throat. But he choked it down; realizing doing so meant losing his precious blossoms. Phut craned his neck to catch sight of the newcomers.

Several moments later, he saw the men and recognized the familiar figure of Tiga. *A search party!*

The wild dogs were now on their feet, the fur on their back bristling. He realized they were gearing up to attack. The search party had to be alerted. Releasing an arm, he reached for the blossoms in his mouth. While he single-handedly grasped the tree trunk. With his mouth freed, he yelled, “Tiga! Be careful...Wild dogs!”

It surprised Tiga to hear his brother’s voice but not see him. His two companions, hearing the warning call, instantly readied their staffs. They knew how dangerous wild dogs could be.

Before Phut could utter another word, he felt his arm losing its grasp on the trunk. Instantly, he rushed his free hand to stop the slip, crushing the blossoms in the process. “Aaaa…ah…!”A cry of anguish erupted from him. He quickly latched on to the trunk and hung there.

A deep throated growling resounded from below. Phut saw the rescue party break out from amidst the trees. The wild dogs continued to snarl and growl. Then, one by one, they backed away, disappearing into the forest.

When all the wild dogs had gone, Tiga looked up at Phut. “You can now come down, you devil octopus.”

Phut slithered down the trunk with misgivings. He had lost the blossoms and was sure Tiga would give him a hiding. As soon as he dropped to the ground, he flung himself around Tiga in a tight embrace. “Thank you…Thank you brother for saving my life…”

“Why did you disobey, father?” Tiga demanded angrily. “Do you know the trouble you have caused?”

“I am sorry brother…I will never do it again…Please forgive me brothers.” He turned to Tiga’s companions, trying to win their sympathy.

“First tell me, you rascal, what were you doing alone in the forest?” Tiga took him to task.

This was the question Phut dreaded. He looked at the crushed blossoms. There were trampled beyond recognition. It gave him an idea. “Do you promise not to scold me if I told you the truth?” He looked at his brother with big, innocent eyes.

Tiga’s eyes narrowed in suspicion.

“I came up here to get some blossoms for Mipi…but now they are all destroyed.” He held up the trampled stalks to prove himself. “How beautiful she would look with them…” He forced tears from his eyes.

Hearing the name of Mipi, Tiga softened slightly. “Let’s hurry back, Phut.”

But Phut had other plans. He hesitated. Tiga looked at him. “What now?”

“Could I get a few more blossoms? For Mipi.” Phut added quickly.

“All right! Get the blossoms and hurry up before the dogs are back!”

Phut was not listening. He was thrashing through the brush, plucking blossoms.

When he was ready to leave, there was a sparkle in his eye.

All those who saw Phut offer Mipi the blossoms were overwhelmed with his gesture. Everyone except the shaman. He sensed Phut was lying. The boy had another motive of going into the forest. He swore to monitor the little octopus.

While the elders were engrossed in the marriage ritual, Phut was busy searching for Sithayu. As soon as he sighted her, he walked up to her. “Sithayu, your mother needs to see you, immediately.”

Sithayu screwed up her nose in distaste. She didn’t want to miss the ritual.

“Hurry up,” he urged. People were looking at them. Reluctantly, she followed him. He led her to the seclusion of the shelters. She looked around in puzzlement. “Where is mother?”

With a thudding heart and a trembling hand, he extracted the blossoms carefully from inside his shirt. “Take these wear them in your hair.” He offered them to her.

She eyed the pink and blue blossoms in his hand, puzzled. “Why?”

“So you…you can look beautiful…like a… queen,” he flustered.

She looked at his face, his imploring eyes. For a few moments, both of them stood in silence.

 The sky shrouded in darkness, the earth and the sea seem to wait.

Loud sound and music invaded the silence. The marriage was complete. It seemed to break their trance. She smiled coyly at Phut, grabbed the blossoms, and fled.

Phut exhaled deeply and knelt in the sand. He felt exhilarated.

Unseen by the two, the shaman watched the whole meeting and the offering of blossoms. He shook his head gravely. It did not look good. He looked up and prayed for protection from the Moken Gods.

Above, the dark skies thundered, and the breeze whipped up a violent wind. A storm was approaching. The shaman could feel a strong sense of foreboding. Something bad was going to happen.

8. The Moken Prophecy – The Hapless Siblings

At that very moment, the dreaded trawler docked on Ahata Island. Anxiety and fear spread throughout the island like fire. In the gathering dusk, the terrorized inhabitants assembled.

Captain Foki appeared on the deck, staggering and drunk. “You Moken swines and sows... I am the sole benefactor of your filthy lives…” He squinted as he looked at the gathered folks.

Giggling headily, he continued, “The whole lot of you are good for nothing…I am come to return what I have taken…!” He drunkenly gestured to his men.

A while later, the brother and sister he had taken that morning appeared. One look at them and the gathered crowd knew something was terribly wrong. The brother could barely walk. His sister and a naval rating supported him on either side.

It did not take them a moment to realize the brother’s affliction. He was suffering from a disease called *taravana*-a common sickness among divers. It occurred when divers increased their diving for extended periods or at greater depth, without ascending gradually.

It formed bubbles of gas in the blood and solid tissues that caused symptoms like rashes and joint pains in milder cases, to paralysis, lung damage and even death.

The sister, too, looked in a critical condition. She hobbled badly, and it was clear the cause was not her brother’s weight. The captain and his ratings had ravaged her to no extent. Her face was swollen with bruises; even her arms bore angry welts.

The story was obvious to everyone. While diving to the seabed to retrieve the antiques, it forced the brother to ignore the rules of safety to save his sister. In the process, he had damaged himself. But the captain and his men were animals; nevertheless, they had ravaged her.

They tossed the ailing man on the beach along with his sister. Without another word, the captain left, to everybody’s relief. The Headman ordered the gathered people to take care of the two.

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*Kabangs* filled with marriage revelers arrived from Buro Island the next day. The folk of Ahata Island were ready to welcome them. The Headman had specifically told them not to mention about the misfortune of the brother and sister. Both of them were in an awful state. There was no point spoiling the marriage celebrations.

Phut could not keep his excitement down. He was extremely delighted that Sithayu was visiting his island. The previous evening, she had proudly worn his pink and blue blossoms in her hair. She looked like the most beautiful girl he had ever seen.

The only thing that displeased him was that he could not travel with her. Father had strictly told him not to get into trouble. So he curbed all his excitement and sat close to his father. He promised himself he would take utmost care of her on his island.

Even before his *kabang* touched the land, Phut was on the beach. His sights eagerly searched for Sithayu’s *kabang* to land. A while later he saw it, with Sithayu in the fore. She smiled coyly at him. It was enough to send his pulse racing. Barely had he raised his hand to wave at her when he felt a grip on his arm.

He looked up to see the stoic face of the shaman looking down at him. “Hurry, Phut your father asked for you.”

A string of obscenities ran through his mind, but he calmed himself. He dared not disobey the shaman. Giving one last look at Sithayu, he turned and ran towards his shelter. The shaman stood there watching the young girl. Slowly, he followed the boy.

Phut never realized he was deliberately being kept busy by his father and the shaman. All he could think of was when he could slip away and spend time with his lovely Sithayu.

He got his chance when at last the celebrations began. Seeing his father and the shaman engrossed in the guest, he slipped away. Finding Sithayu was not a problem.

“Sithayu, your mother needs to see you immediately.” Phut announced as soon as he was near her.

She realized what he hinted at. Quickly, she was following him. Wordlessly, he led her to his shelter.

Once inside, he turned to her. He was breathless from excitement and the effort of running. She stood at the door, breathless and apprehensive.

“Come in. I have something to show you.” Phut invited her. Still apprehensive, she stepped in.

Phut immediately began rummaging among his things. He cursed himself; there was nothing feminine to offer. *Why did he not think of something before he had invited her?*

His eyes fell on his mother’s favorite sea-shell necklace; she was to wear it for the celebrations. He was desperate. Surely mother would not mind losing a necklace, he reckoned. He picked it up and offered it to Sithayu.

Her eyes glittered at the sight of it. But she was hesitant.

“Take it.” he coaxed her.

But she stood there, embarrassed by the attention received. Phut swore inwardly, mother could return any moment. She would be highly displeased with the loss of her favorite sea-shell necklace. And if she realized he had taken it, he would be in for a good scolding.

The only thing he knew was that he had to help Sithayu to make up her mind.

He grasped it, moved behind her and, before she could even realize, clasp the necklace around her neck.

He stood before her to admire. She looked even lovelier with the necklace. Then he did something he never even dared to dream. He bent over and planted a kiss on her cheek.

She stumbled backwards, completely aghast, alarm in her voice rising. “What did you do Phut?”

Phut squirmed in embarrassment. “I have decided to make you my wife one day…”

She stared at him, wide-eyed and open-mouthed. When at last the words sank in, she blushed. Her usual coy smile beginning to curve her lips.

Before either could say a word, a shrill cry swept through the island. The children, alarmed, rushed to the window. People were running towards one particular shelter.

Phut grabbed her hand and ran out.

The shaman jerked to alertness. He could already sense something bad. It could not be worse than death. His eyes sought the confused crowd. He was in time to see the two tiny figures emerge from a shelter*. Phut and the little girl!*

He shook his head gravely and headed towards the scream.

The sister ravaged by the captain and his men had committed suicide by hanging herself. She could not bear the guilt of causing her brother’s affliction and her humiliation. Her brother was paralyzed, waist down. He would probably never, ever walk.

But the shaman knew better. The decade old prophecy was coming true. This was the beginning. *Death was coming…in abundance!*

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Phut was on his way to Buro Island with his father. It was a week since he had seen Sithayu. The marriage celebration was spoiled by the sister’s death. And he never had a chance to meet Sithayu that day. This time, he had carried with him a variety of gifts for her. He was looking forward to this trip.

Father let him free on Buro Island only when he promised to behave himself. He raced to a group of children playing. “Hi Phut.” They called in chorus.

“How are the wild dogs!” It was Niti, she was teasing. His episode with the wild dogs was famous all over Buro Island.

He grinned sheepishly and could not help asking. “Where is Sithayu?”

The group grew silent and stared at him. He waited expectantly. When there was no answer, he asked in alarm. “What has happened…to her?”

Niti stepped forward. “Sithayu is gone.”

“Gone?” Phut asked. “What do you mean, gone, Niti?”

“Sithayu and her family left Buro Island a few days ago.”

Phut stared at her in -complete disbelief. “Where did they go?” he demanded.

“Nobody knows where they left for…They suddenly left during the night.”

He continued to stare with disbelief, locking eyes with each of them.

Slowly, tears glistened in his eyes; ashamed, he hurriedly wiped them and screamed, “Liars! You all are liars! I don’t believe any of you!” He turned around and ran, heading for Sithayu’s monsoon shelter.

Niti watched him run away. She wondered what had upset him so much. But somehow she could feel his pain.

Sithayu’s shelter was gone. All he found was a vacant space. It had been dismantled and taken away; they were never returning back.

With utter dejection, he turned around heading towards the sea. He stood there watching the waves roll, fighting back the tears. *How could she do this to him? How could she leave him and go?*

He stayed there until the tears ebbed. As he turned away, he realized he still clutched Sithayu’s gift. With an angry swear, he flung it into the sea. He watched it sink and disappear just as Sithayu had. Biting down angry tears, he turned away.

9. The Moken Prophecy – Love Lost!

**September 2004.**

Phut was a young man now, but there was not a single day he did not remember Sithayu. For the last eight years, he had scoured most of the islands in the vicinity. But Sithayu was nowhere to be found. She and her family had disappeared like a pebble in the Andaman Sea. Every sunrise and sunset, he would look fondly in the direction of Buro Island.

He took it to be his destiny and let no one know his grief. Maybe he had greater things to achieve, he consoled himself. Silently, he worked hard with his father and brother. He even accepted the marriage proposal of Nit44i without a murmur. Though he was sure he did not love her the way he loved Sithayu. He was also sure Niti too, knew about it. But, as usual, destiny had other plans.

**December 2004**

A few months before Phut’s marriage, Tiga was on Buro Island. Mipi was pregnant and was to deliver soon. This would be their third child. The first two were stillborn.

Burmese naval boats surrounded early one morning the little flotilla of Phut and his colony. The *kabangs* were quickly herded together with gunfire from machine guns mounted on the deck.

When the guns grew silent, Captain Foki’s bald head appeared, grinning. Two dark red lines marred his face. It seemed like a cat scratched him. “Welcome Moken filth. This probably is our last meeting. But I have one favor to ask from you.” He turned to his men. “Get the young sows and swines!”

More than a dozen gun-toting naval men climbed on to the *kabangs*. The Moken elders shuddered in fear. They realized what the captain was up to. Chief Po, the pirate leader, had warned them about the rounding-up getting forceful…

The Moken were being trapped and caged like wild animals. The Myanmar government was trying to create a permanent Moken national park as a tourist attraction. The government of Thailand had done it and was successful. If it was so, the end of the Moken was imminent.

The realization brought silent wailing and sobbing. It was certain they would never see the young men and women ever again.

Just as the gun-toting men landed on a *kabang*, there was a sound of splashing water. One of the Moken youth had leaped into the sea to escape capture

The men looked at the captain. He guffawed. “Shoot one of the swine’s parents!” The captain’s men grabbed an elderly man from the *kabang*, placed him on the edge, and put a gun to his head.

From above, the captain barked. “Shoot the old swine!”

A single shot rang and the old man toppled lifelessly into the water.

The youth in the water instinctively turned. His sight sought his *kabang*. At a glance, he measured the situation. He saw the old man’s corpse bobbing on the water's surface. Even worse, up on the *kabang* the captain’s men were preparing to kill another member of his family, a child of four. With a scream of surrender, he turned around and headed for the *kabang*.

As the men hauled him out of the water. The captain laughed aloud. “Fool, nobody escapes me!”

Within minutes, the naval ratings had selected over three dozen young men and women. Their hands were bound and were paraded before the captain. Then they were sent to the lower holding deck. None resisted, they had seen the captain’s cruelty.

Phut was one of the men selected for the Moken national park. He bravely walked to the captain.

“Good, I like fiery men! You are a marked man, Moken swine.”

After watching the misery and sobbing around him, Phut knew he had to kill the captain or die trying. The swine of the captain had brought a lot of suffering to the Moken colonies. In a moment, he realized this was what destiny had in store for him. This was why destiny had taken away Sithayu.

Just before he could step onto the lower deck, he turned and waved to his parents. He was sure he would never see them again. Not after what he had planned.

Matu and his wife watched their son disappear into the lower deck. A wave of grief washed over them. The old parents hugged each other and wept inconsolably.

Matu recalled the shaman’s prophetic words; *Was the dismal prophecy coming true?*

A while later, the naval boats left, leaving behind only pain and loud wailing. Deep grief enveloped Matu with Phut’s departure*. Could this be the end of the Moken?*

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**Kurvin Islands close to the Myanmar mainland.**

The young captives were taken to an island close to the mainland. More wailing and sobbing greeted them.

As soon as Phut’s hands were released, he immediately began a recce of the place.

They were put in a large open-aired pen like enclosure. Razor-tipped, cyclone barbed wire ran around its perimeter. Four watchtowers were erected in which men armed with machine guns watched the captives day and night. A simple thatch roof of palm branches was the only shelter for the captives against the scorching summer sun and the chilly night chill.

A few dozen yards away was a double-storied structure, the guards and the officers’ quarters. Behind it lay the open Andaman Sea.

Young Moken men and women forcibly taken away from other colonies were stationed here, too. From here, they were to be taken to their captive national parks.

Chained to one of the watchtower’s post was a wretched creature. His clothes were in tatters, his face was bruised, swollen and sunburnt. One of his arms was useless… injured with what looked like a bullet wound. He seemed to be living in his own filth, a day or two old. Flies buzzed around and a stench arose from him.

Curious, Phut moved closer to inspect. The hapless man struggled to open his bruised eye. Looking at Phut, his swollen lips moved feebly. “Water…water Little Octopus…water…”

Phut was stunned. Only one person on the earth addressed him thus. He looked closely. *The tortured man was the pirate leader Chief Po!*

The terrible plight of Chief Po pained him. He hurried to the cement water trough and filled a bowl weaved from bamboo strips. The pirate had always been kind to him. Taking it, he raced across the ground.

Barely a yard away from Chief Po, a barrage of machine-gun bullets cut across his path. Angrily, Phut looked up at the guard in the watchtower.

Over the smoking muzzle of the machine gun, the guard signaled him away. “No food or water for the filthy pirate…Captain Foki’s orders!”

Phut looked at the pirate. The man was looking hopefully at him. He could not step back. Within a moment, he made a decision.

Swiftly, he dashed across towards the chief. Grabbed a part of the watchtower’s post so as to conceal himself from the guard above. Safely, away from the watch guard’s sight, he gave the drink to the parched man.

Before the other guards could arrive, the pirate had drunk every drop of water. “Thank you Little Octopus…” Chief Po called as they dragged the smiling Phut away.

10. The Moken Prophecy - Fate’s Cruel Trick

As Phut was a new arrival, they gave him a lenient punishment. They chained him to another watchtower’s post and was to be kept thirsty and hungry for the next eight hours.

Later, when he was alone, other Moken youth came to congratulate him. After all, Po had been endearing to all Moken, only no one dared to do what Phut had done.

From them, he learned that somehow Captain Foki had discovered Chief Po’s hideout. He had raided the pirates’ den and massacred all the men. He had taken Po alive, along with his three wives.

To humiliate Po, the captain and his men had ravished the two elder wives. However, the younger one had behaved feisty, clawing the captain’s face. Angered, the captain had declared that Po would be treated worse than a swine till the little sow would not give up herself to him willingly. A day had passed since the declaration.

Just then, a bell rang. It was a bell of summons. All eyes turned to the double-storey building. A half-dressed Captain Foki appeared on the top floor. The two dark red lines on his face looked livid. Phut now realized the source of it.

The captain dragged a scantily dressed woman by her hair. A lusty roar of applause rose from the guards. Phut presumed this was Po’s unfortunate third wife. She had accepted the captain’s proposal and now he was extracting revenge.

The captain dragged her all the way into the Moken’s enclosure and stood before Po. When he was sure he had everyone’s attention, he wagged his tongue at the pirate. Slowly, he ran his tongue on the woman’s face and neck, leaving a slimy line of saliva. “This is what I do with filth!” He flung her to the ground.

Unconsciously, he caressed the scar on his face. He guffawed when she tried to hide her modesty.

Turning to his men, he ordered. “Get the pirate cleaned and ready for execution! Free him, but keep the constraints on his hands and feet!” With that, he walked away.

From the other side of the yard, Phut watched it all. The desire to kill the captain hardened. His attention turned to Po. Someone had given the wife clothes to cover her nakedness. Others had brought water to drink and clean. He watched as she cleaned Po and gave him a drink of water. Then they rested and talked. It was clear she adored Po.

Occasionally, they looked across the yard at him and talked. It was obvious he was the topic of discussion.

Just as the noon heat subsided, he saw them coming towards him. Po hobbled painfully, aided by his wife, the constraints adding to his discomfort.

Half way down the yard, Phut jerked to attention. Po’s wife too stopped. She turned pale and trembled slightly. Po looked alarmed.

“Sithayu!” Phut called aloud, springing to his feet. *Po’s wife was Sithayu!* He could not make a mistake. Her image was imprinted on his memory. There was not a day he had not imagined her.

“Phut!” Po’s wife answered back.

Po’s wife was indeed Sithayu!

Phut could not believe his Sithayu was back. His elation was intense. For the moment, he felt like screaming with joy… leaping around…grabbing her in a tight embrace. But he stood statue-like, drinking in her beauty.

Sithayu had changed. She was now a woman. But she still bore the resemblance of the Sithayu he had seen eight years ago. She had lost her baby fat; she was now taller and fairer. Her hair was longer. But her innocence and beauty had not changed. She was still the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

The two stood looking at each other, oblivious to the surroundings.

“Do the two of you know each other?” Po interrupted the embarrassing silence.

“Yes…yes…” Phut answered breathlessly. “Why did you leave suddenly, Sithayu?” He turned to her.

Po and Sithayu looked at each other. He nodded.

Reluctantly Sithayu began. “We did not leave. We were *coerced to leave!* Sent to dwell with the pirates! If Po had not sheltered us we would be living the life of beggars. My parents worked for the pirates. After their death, Po married me. It was the only thing he could do to save me from others.”

Phut was bristling with anger. “Who forced you out of the colony?”

Once again Sithayu sought Po’s permission. “Your shaman and father Matu!”

“My father and the shaman!” Phut echoed the words in disbelief. “Impossible!”

But Sithayu was shaking her head. “A day or two after Tiga’s marriage, your shaman, father Matu and my shaman came to meet my parents. After a lot of discussion, my father got ready to leave. Father never told me the reason till the day he died.”

“Why would they do so?” Phut turned to Po for an explanation. But all he got was a sad nod. It was senseless. If only he could meet his father! Anger built in him. *Why...Why... Why had father played such a cruel trick?*

When he turned to Sithayu he noticed her eyes were misty with tears.

 It pained him to see her cry. He felt like taking her in his arms. Just then, a painful thought scythed through his heart. She was no longer his Sithayu! She was Po’s wife.

The thought brought tears to his eyes, but he bravely kept them at bay. He stood there watching her, cursing his luck. A squall of childhood memories erupted, cauterizing his heart like acid. For a life-time he yearned to meet her, yet when he finally did he could not make her his wife.

“Little Flower, let’s settle down here for the night with Little Octopus.” Po had a strange look in his eye when he spoke to Sithayu.

Just before nightfall, the guards unchained Phut from the post. Sithayu brought him food and drink. Po watched in silence.

As they settled down, Phut noticed the stress and weariness in her eyes. He remembered how the captain had humiliated her. His anger flared. There were just two goals in his life: kill the captain and get back to his father.

That night, no sleep came to him. He watched Sithayu sleep. She looked so beautiful and innocent, almost like an angel. Sometime near dawn, he fell asleep.

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**26 December 2004**

It was nearly sunrise when Phut was abruptly awoken.

Two guards towered over him. “Hurry.” they urged him. “The captain wants to see you and Po’s wife!”

He immediately grew alert. His eyes sought Sithayu. She sat huddled in fear. The pirate chief was nowhere to be seen. “Where is Po?” Phut asked the guards.

“Hurry!” was the only answer he got.

He moved towards Sithayu. “Where is Po?” she whispered. There was fear in her eyes.

Clutching her hand, he helped her up. “Let’s go and find Po.” A fresh dread filled Phut.

Silently, they followed the guards.

They were taken to the captain’s room. Po was dressed in fresh clothes and drinking wine with the captain. He waved a walking stick at them. “Come in Little Flower and Octopus! I have just bought your freedom from the captain!”

An alarm went off in Phut’s head. “Chief Po it’s bad…”

“Little Octopus, not another word.” Po interrupted. “The captain has been gracious enough to free us…in exchange of a small sum of money that I have promised. So the two of you get ready to leave.”

The captain laughed aloud, smacking his lips as he sipped his wine. The laughter could be anything from ridicule to mockery.

Phut began to speak but Po cut him. “Get ready to leave!” Then, dropping his voice, he whispered, “Keep your eyes on me all the time.”

11. The Moken Prophecy – The Ruse

Sometime after sunrise, they set out in the trawler. Phut was surprised to see that the four of them were the only occupants. Captain Foki drove while Po navigated it as they continued to drink wine. The former had made sure to keep the duo at the bow before his eyes. Phut was certain the pirate chief had a plan.

Finding himself alone with Sithayu suddenly made him nervous. Even small talk seemed difficult. There were a million things he wanted to tell her. Things that he had locked in his heart for years.

He remembered how he had kissed her…it made him blush. He wished to do it again. But now it would be wrong. Even to speak of his feelings was wrong. So he just watched her, cursing his luck.

She, too seemed withdrawn. *Was she nervous too in his presence or was she worried about their fate?* Phut wondered.

They watched the open sea, occasionally smiling at each other. When the silence grew suffocating, he asked. “Do you know where Po is taking us?”

She smiled apologetically. “Po has always been mysterious and secretive.”

Just hearing her voice and seeing her smile made his heart thump harder.

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Nearly two hours later, it halted near an island. Just as Po walked by Phut a knowing look passed through his eyes. *Keep your eyes on me all the time.*

Po was first to disembark, followed by Phut and Sithayu, with Captain Foki bringing up the rear. The beach was desolate with scraggly vegetation. For long distances, there was no sign of human inhabitants. Phut realized they were on one of those several small islands which did not measure more than a few square kilometers in area.

The moment they landed, the captain asked, “Where is the hidden loot, Po?”

“Relax Foki, just a few minutes’ walk up there!” Po pointed to a hill ahead with his walking stick. It was a volcanic hill lying less than half a mile away. “Little Octopus, could you help me to the hill?”

Phut obliged. Again Po’s eyes seem to say*. Keep your eyes on me all the time.*

Silently, the group began towards the hill. The sun was beating down relentlessly. A treacherous path ran uphill. It was scattered with loose rocks, but they trudged on.

The top of the hill was the highest point of the island. It offered a complete view of the sea. Vegetation, sand, and treacherous rocks fringed the island.

Foki looked around; this was no place to hide any loot. “Where is the damn loot, Po?” He asked dubiously. “Where is it?”

Po grinned in return. “First, I want you to free Little Flower and Octopus, Foki!”

Phut looked questioningly at Po. “Don’t be surprised, Octopus. Can’t I read the love in your and her eyes? Am I blind?”

Phut could not believe. He looked at Sithayu. She avoided him.

“Damn you Po, I don’t have time for your games!” Enraged, Foki whipped out his pistol. “For the last time, pirate, where is the gold?”

“What are you going to do, Foki?” He limped closer to the captain and continued. “Kill me? I really don’t care!”

“Last chance, where is the gold?” the captain demanded.

Po exhaled laboriously as he continued to limp forward.

“Hurry up!” ordered Foki, “or these Moken pigs will fly to heaven!” The pistol shifted its sights to the Moken duo.

Gripping Sithayu’s hand, Phut shielded her with his body. He felt his body go taut. *Till he was alive, nobody could harm her. And definitely not Foki!*

“Ahh!” Foki directed the pistol at him. “So we have a pair of Moken love birds!”

Strenuously, Po limped ahead.

Foki pistol now shifted target from Phut to the limping pirate. Po had completely eclipsed the duo with his body.

“Let them go, Foki. Only then will I give you the loot!” The pirate took a step forward, his eyes on the captain.

“Stand back, pirate swine!” Foki pulled back the hammer.

Po stopped. Without a warning he leaped at Foki. Simultaneously, Foki pulled the trigger, firing a couple of rounds into Po, but he stayed on to the captain.

“No, Chief Po!” Phut cried in anguish.

“Run, Octopus…Save Little Flower…Go!” Po yelled. In a moment, Po and Foki were on the ground, struggling.

Phut looked unsurely at Sithayu. He could not think of leaving the pirate by himself, but there was Sithayu to protect.

Reading his mind, she urged him, “Please save Po. He needs us.”

Another round of gunfire echoed. Foki had the gripped Po by the throat; he was bringing up the gun to blast the pirate’s face.

Phut did not need urging. He attacked Foki like a wild animal. Rushing over to Foki, he brought his palms down, clapping them hard on the captain’s ears. Before the captain could recover, he grabbed the captain’s pistol arm. Twisting it, he bent it to breaking point, forcing the captain to drop the weapon.

“Let go of me you…swine! I swear I will set you free…” Foki spluttered.

 All the misery and pain inflicted on Sithayu, Po and the Moken flashed before him. All that he knew…Foki had to die! Nothing else mattered; his mind was burning with revenge.

Sithayu rushed to Po. He had sustained three bullet wounds. Two in his belly and one in his chest. His belly was bleeding profusely. But the chest wound seemed fatal. He needed urgent help.

Keeping his grip on Foki’s arm, Phut pushed him to the ground. Placing his foot on the captain’s neck, he forced his face into the sand. “This is for Sithayu…” Phut yelled as he pushed the captain’s face harder into the sand. “And this for Po…my Moken people…” Phut continued. He felt Foki’s struggle weaken, yet he kept his hold.

“Phut please…” Sithayu called, interrupting him. “Po needs help…quickly!”

Phut looked up. He had the look of a predator unwilling to let go of its prey. But seeing Sithayu’ s beseeching look, he relented. He eased the pressure on Foki’s neck. But retained his grip on the arm.

Foki lifted his face from the sand and coughed. Veins bulged in his sand-covered face and his eyes were bloodshot red. “Please…Phut forgive me,” he begged.

Phut grabbed him by the shoulders and smashed a knee into his face, breaking his nose. With a howl of pain, Foki grabbed his bloodied nose. But Phut was not finished; once again he smashed his knee into Foki’s chin.

Leaving the incapacitated captain on the floor howling with pain, he rushed to Po. The pirate’s belly was a bloody mess. “Water…water.” Po whispered. He was also losing consciousness. Medical aid was paramount.

“Let’s take him to the boat…He needs a doctor!” Sithayu urged.

Phut looked at the boat docked at the far end of the island. There was not a decent spot of shade in between. It would be a tough journey just getting him down there. But he knew he could not forsake Po. He owed Sithayu and his freedom to him.

Sharing Po’s weight, the two began trudging downhill. The injured man was growing heavier with every step. The scorching sun, adding to their difficulty.

Barely a short distance in descent and they were tiring. Phut noticed, Sithayu could not take the dual strain. He signaled her to stop in the shade of a rock.

“Water…water.” Po whispered almost in a groan as they placed him down.

It had been hours since they had a drink of water. “Sithayu stay with him. I will get water from the trawler.” She acknowledged with a wave of her arm, too tired to speak.

Leaving them, Phut hurried to the trawler. Heat, tiredness or thirst seemed to have any effect on him. All he knew was Sithayu and his freedom was back.

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“Welcome Moken swine!” Foki’s voice echoed as Phut returned with the water.

What Phut saw chilled his blood. Foki stood atop, his face bloodied and grinning. He held Sithayu, a pistol pressed to her head. Po’s form lay crumpled at his feet. “Well Moken swine, you made a mistake of double crossing me!”

“Please Captain, don’t hurt anyone…” Phut implored.

“Silence swine! Don’t dare to speak! You garbage dared to raise a hand on me! Captain Foki! First, I will teach this pirate a lesson!” He grabbed Po by his neck and pushed him over the edge. With a muted scream, Po sailed into the empty air.

Phut was barely aware of Sithayu or his scream. All he saw was Po’s limp body bounce onto the rocks a couple of times. Then roll and finally settle in the sand, a few yards from him. He rushed to the lifeless body; it was badly bloodied and mangled. Po was dead. There was nothing he could do for him. He turned to Foki furiously.

“No swine, don’t do it or we will see if your sow can fly!” Foki jerked her lightly forward over the edge.

“No, please don’t do it…” Phut begged, it would be devastating to lose her again.

“Good then, listen well… your sow is going to take me to the boat! If you interfere, I shoot her!”

Phut nodded. He would do anything to save her.

Putting Sithayu before him, Foki began down the incline. One wrong footing by Foki could send Sithayu over the edge. Slowly and carefully, the two started. The captain’s wary eyes remained continuously on Phut, but his pistol stayed tenaciously on Sithayu. It was long stressful minutes till they descended.

Once down, Foki began towards the boat, holding Sithayu in the same manner. Phut stayed well behind. He would not do a thing to endanger Sithayu’s life.

“Stop swine!” Foki ordered, when he reached the boat. Turning the pistol, he squeezed the trigger.

Sithayu screamed in horror as she saw a bullet blast near Phut’s feet.

“No captain…please!” she begged tearfully as Foki thumbed back the hammer.

“This is as far as you come!” yelled Foki. Another two shots, one grazed Phut’s thigh. The other hit his arm.

Phut sprawled to the ground, bleeding. Sithayu screamed and tried to run towards him, but the captain dragged her into the boat. “Now this will make the race interesting! Sow, nobody will save you from me!” Flinging her on to the deck, he started the engine.

“Phut…Phut!” she continued to scream between her sobs. She watched him lay lifeless as ever.

“Phut, l love you! I really do! I always did!” she wept.

Just as the vessel’s motor roared to life, Phut raised his head. With a great effort, he got to his feet. “Foki, you swine!” he yelled.

Foki looked behind, grinning; keeping the motor running, he waited. Sithayu tearfully watched

Phut walk unsteadily; his shirt covered with blood and sand. Weakly, he staggered to reach the vessel.

“No Phut don’t come!” She now realized with dread what Foki planned to do.

Just as he reached the vessel, Foki laughed and drove it out into the open sea.

“No Phut please…” A cry of anguish erupted from her as Phut stumbled into the water. With a determined effort, he swam, trying to keep up with the speeding vessel.

His efforts were useless, wounded as he was. He would never make it. And only speed his death. “Go back Phut…go back!” she begged, weeping.

It was clear he was weakening, but stubbornly kept swimming. Even keeping afloat was difficult. For moments, he would disappear under water to resurface, gasping for air. He was exhausting himself and would not last long.

Foki gleefully watched the man flounder. His malicious fun was interrupted when he heard a splash. Unable to bear Phut’s plight, Sithayu had jumped into the sea. It did not matter, he would have some fun. Slowly, he turned the vessel around.

Once in the sea, Sithayu looked around. Phut was nowhere in sight. She dived underwater, yet she could not see him. She resurfaced again, gulped in air, and dived deeper. To her horror, she saw his limp figure sinking to the bottom.

With powerful strokes, she went after him. She grabbed at him and sought his mouth, pressing her lips to his, pushing her breath into him.

For moments she hung on to him, sharing her breath. Slowly he opened his eyes, realized the predicament they were in. “Go…” he tried to signal her away.

“Come!” she signaled upwards. With an effort, he tried to swim but was too weak.

Still clinging on to him, she started pulling him upwards. It was fairly difficult. Her breath and strength were beginning to fail. Her lungs were already burning due to lack of air. By herself, she would have made it to the surface, but his additional weight was pulling her down. She continued in her ordeal…she had to save him. With this thought, she gathered strength and continued.

Within a few moments, she could see rays of sunlight. She realized they had reached the surface!

She broke the surface and took a gulp of air.

As she pulled the limp form of Phut, the roar of the engine filled her ears. She looked around and was in time to see Foki drive the vessel right towards them. In an instant, the vessel would plow them down. She quickly pushed Phut to one side to avoid the rotor blades.

The vessel drove past her, its blades angrily churning up the water. Instantly, she knew her fears had come true. The water near the blades was stained-red.

When it passed by, she desperately looked for Phut. He was nowhere in sight. Once again, the roar of the engine could be heard. She realized Foki was turning the vessel around to run her down. She gulped air and dived under the surface, looking for Phut.

In the water's gloom, she saw his lifeless form rapidly sinking to the bottom. Blood was oozing from a deep gash on his shoulder.

She quickly swam and grabbed him. Pressing her lips to him, she tried to force her breath, but it was no use. His eyes fluttered open briefly. Seeing her, he resisted.

 “Go save yourself,” he mouthed.

“No!” she stubbornly clung to him. “I will never leave you…ever!”

“I love you, Sithayu!” he mouthed weakly.

“I love you too, Phut!” she mouthed. Embracing him tightly, she began the gradual descent with him to the seabed.

12. The Moken Prophecy - Payback

The entire community of Ahata Island was on Buro Island. They were here to welcome the birth of Tiga and Mipi’s child. Though aggrieved with the loss of their members, the birth of a child was always a joyous occasion.

But once again, they were welcomed with bad news. Tiga’s boy child was stillborn; it was the third child in a row. Yet, this was impossible; the turtle had prophesied great things for the child. Matu’s family was terribly downcast. Tiga was yet to be told of his brother’s capture.

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Still locked in a loving embrace, Phut and Sithayu touched the seabed, their last gasp of breaths escaping them, along with their life. Life had separated them, but death brought them together.

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The crying of the child startled every mourner. Tiga was the first to realize it was the sound of his dead baby boy. Mourning turned to rejoicing. The dead child had miraculously returned to life. The turtle prophecy could never go wrong.

Looking proudly at his son, Tiga mused, *If only Phut was here!*

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Some odd thirty meters undersea, the corpse of Phut and Sithayu lay among the sea grass and coral, locked in their death embrace. Water currents rocked the lovers peacefully, only watched by the passing fish.

Everything remained tranquil for a few moments, till a low rumble resounded from afar. The rumble moved through the water with twice the speed of a locomotive. Scattering fish in its path like an invisible predator.

On the surface Foki neither heard nor felt anything in his vessel.

The shaman was first to notice the disturbance on the sea surface. He quickly alerted the people.

Down below, the seabed split, a crack that went meters deep and many several kilometers long, all along the ocean floor. A part of the ocean floor began rising, slowly at first, then rapidly. It continued to rise from its position. The displaced water, several hundred cubic meters in volume, surged in all directions. It created waves, a meter high and a speed of about a hundred meters per second.

Foki watched the rising waves; it was no concern to him. The Andaman Sea often threw unpleasant surprises.

Down below, the ocean floor continued its ascent till it was high as a hill, forcing the sea to rise, creating mountainous waves to travel at over a hundred meters per second.

Over the horizon, Foki watched in horror as the gargantuan swell approached his vessel.

*Tsunami!* Was the only word he could think.

Within moments, the monstrous swell, three storeys high, was over him. He tried to turn the vessel around, but in vain. The towering wall of water flipped over the vessel, slamming it back into the sea.

Pinned under the monstrous deluge, it forced the vessel deep into the depths of the sea. Trapped inside the upside down vessel, he could feel it descend with the speed of a snapped elevator. Still, he did not panic; he had lived with the sea all his life.

Just as the top grated against the rocky seabed, he quickly swam to an opening and wriggled out.

Instantly, he knew he had erred. The water was pressing down on him like a dome of liquid metal.

His spine was the first to give way. Barely had he moved when an unbearable pain shot in his back. It was like the water was crushing his spine.

Terror filled in him as he realized the pain was due *taravana!* His rapid descent and the tremendous pressure of the Tsunami wave had caused it.

Quickly, the pain shot to his knees, ankles, and elbows. No longer could he bear the pain. It had grown excruciating; now he was writhing with it. Maddened with pain, he could do nothing. The water pressure was crushing him like an empty soda can. An even more terrible pain grew inside his head as his eardrums burst.

Moments later, another equally terrible pain burst in his chest. Little did he realize his lungs had ruptured. Blood erupted from his mouth, ears, and nose. Bleeding like a gutted fish, he started descending to the seabed. He lay among the coral and rocks, twitching in his death spasms. The last he saw was a few yards away. The lovers lay in their tight embrace, peacefully.

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**Kurvin Islands close to the Myanmar mainland.**

The terrified watchtower’s guards were the first to sight the monstrous swell in the sea. It was roaring loudly as it approached the island from all sides. Screams of terror swept through the entire camp.

 Even as the petrified guards were raising the alarm, it came crashing into the island.

The watchtowers, twenty-foot high, were the first to be obliterated. The monstrous tsunami wave easily towered over them, bringing them crashing down on to the screaming prisoners.

The double storey guards and the officers’ quarters were next to be destroyed under the fury of the gigantic wall of water. Before the first wave could die down, another swell slammed into it. It tore up the metal fence, uprooting its poles. Those unlucky prisoners caught in this metal-like net were sliced up with the power of an electric saw.

It washed away the rest like matchsticks.

Smaller swells followed moments later, crashing into the island, but there was nothing left to obliterate. Then acute silence fell.

The few lucky survivors picked themselves. They watched the surrounding disaster, stunned in silence. The tsunami had inundated the entire island within moments. Everything was buried under a layer of slushy sand. The towers and quarters were smashed to smithereens, their wooden remains drifting in the sea. It turned the island into a big patch of sand. The sand-covered survivors were too shocked to cry.

13. The Moken Prophecy - The Fulfillment

**Buro Island.**

The exodus to the cliff top started with little or no enthusiasm. Nobody wanted to stop their festivities and begin the long trek, first down the beach, then up the cliff. But their respect for the shaman compelled them to do so.

Mipi, barely an hour out of childbirth, had to make the arduous journey. Tiga made a request to build a temporary bed to carry her up.

The shaman refused it. “I believe the prophecy of Phut has come true. We have to move fast.”

Tiga looked at him in disbelief. “Is Phut’s life in danger?”

The shaman looked away, beginning to urge the people to hurry.

Barely half-way down the beach, had they felt a low rumble deep in the earth. It sounded like the groan of a wounded beast. It put the first fear in them.

Before they reached the foot of the cliff, they heard a low roar from the sea. Far on the horizon, the sea was beginning to rise. The rising swell appeared low, but as it neared, it started to gain height. Also, growing in a crescendo, almost as loud as a jet plane. Fear sent them scurrying up. It was the highest wave anyone had seen.

The flotilla of *kabangs* was the first to bear its fury. They watched in terror as their *kabangs* were tossed around easily as paper boats, then slammed to bits.

Another low roar resounded. They looked across the sea. A swell was building, larger and higher than the previous one. Terror-stricken, they scrambled higher, as the wave ferociously raced towards the island.

Below them, the fearsome huge wave rushed deep into the island. The rows of stilted shelters shattered one by one like matchboxes under its brutal force. It seemed to pursue them, stopping just at the foot of the cliff.

The terrified people continued scrambling up with mad haste. Never in their life had the Moken seen the sea reach the cliff foot.

Before it could die down, another fearsome roar echoed across the ocean. It charged like an enormous locomotive, moving over the land till it crashed against the cliff, roaring like an angry beast. It submerged half the cliff under water.

The Moken dropped to their knees and prayed to the Gods and Queen Sibian to forgive them. Up on the cliff top, there was not much room to accommodate all of them. Anything higher and they would perish. But the fearful rise of the sea was not over.

The next swell was the most terrifying. It arose high, almost in par with the cliff. For a few seconds, it almost obliterated the sky and daylight. They watched with terror and helplessness as the mighty wall of water towered over them.

Just as it arose, it fell, spraying them with foam. Swell after swell came raging from the sea, pounding against the cliff as if trying to wrench them down. With every crash, they could feel the cliff tremble with its terrific force.

It continued to batter the cliff for a few minutes; slowly they could feel the sea lose its power. Its deafening roar began to die down and its waves began receding. Silence prevailed all around. Not a single bird or creature called. The only sound was the lashing of the last breakers down below.

Tiga watched the destruction spread all around him. The island had been turned in to a patch of quicksand. All that remained of the *kabangs* and shelters were pieces of wood. Nearly half the cliff was stripped of its vegetation.

A pack of wild dogs emerged from the undergrowth, close to the gathered people. They showed no fear or hatred, they too had taken refuge like the Moken.

The beast brought him memories of Phut. He had once saved his little brother from them. *What had happened to Phut? Where was Phut? Was he dead?*

Instantly, his newborn boy in his arms began to cry. He cradled the child and softly wept. Phut had not gone anywhere; he had come back to him as a child. Only the prophecy told at Phut’s birth had come true.

***Untold danger would befall on the Moken if the child died an unnatural death or was united with his first love!***

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**The Tsunami on December 26, 2004 destroyed the Moken of Myanmar and Thailand living out on the sea. Only a few living on the island escaped by climbing a cliff. The fate of the rest is uncertain. It will take years to realize the actual damage the tsunami has done to the population of these unknown nomadic people.**

**The Moken tribesmen are of Austrontesian origin. They are nomadic people of the sea who probably migrated from southern China several millennia ago. Finally, they settled on the several hundred islands of Merigui Archipelago near Myanmar and Thailand mainland.**

THE BEHEMOTH

1. The Behemoth - The Monstrous Hippo Hunter

The African continent is one huge stretch of desert and open grassland. Yet it is known as the ‘Dark Continent’ for a single reason. Somewhere along its center runs a dark green, damp and cold band of the equatorial rainforest. This bisecting, snaking jungle barely covers 12% of the total continent. Till recent times it has remained untouched by civilization.

Major sectors of impregnable rainforest is unexplored, its primordial nature has remained undisturbed for million years.

Deep in this primeval jungle flows the river Zaire, now Congo. Its tributaries snake deep in the unknown, dark land. Nature here occasionally decides to show its Mr. Hyde’s side in this dark, damp and silent arena.

River Ybankazi, one of the several tributaries of the Congo, cuts a brown, broad swathe in the green cover of the forest. For a good part of its river bank, a pod of hippopotamuses stayed away. Their behavior greatly agitated.

Hippos are the uncrowned kings of the equatorial rainforest. They fear no beast on land or in water. Their jaws can sever a crocodile in half with a single bite.

Despite the growing heat, the bull hippo stayed away from the cool river, his harem following suit. The bull had caught the scent of a familiar but disturbing smell in the river. Even the crocodiles habitually hunting at this time had crawled out on the sandbanks far from the edge, evidently not to bask in the sun.

The mother and calf had strayed away from the pod during the night. It had been a hard struggle against the wild dogs and hyenas. Now, the growing day’s heat was not doing her any good. The bull’s stand-off with the river seemed ignorant to her. All she needed was to douse her skin in the cool river water. She waddled towards the river, her calf in tow.

The river water engulfed them soothingly. At the far end of the river, beneath the murky water, an incredibly long shadow drifted towards the mother and calf.

The sudden swirl of powerful undercurrents never dawned on them until late. An unnatural huge maw seemed to open on the river surface and the thirty-pound calf disappeared into it.

Enraged, the mother turned her gaping jaws and lethal teeth to face the perpetrator. Not to be flustered, the perpetrator retaliated with an awesome six foot jaw, lined with innumerable seven inch teeth. Bellowing almost reptilian like.

The mother realized the danger and turned away with surprising agility for her size. The predator quickly got its jaws on her. A loud crunch sounded as it bit through blubber and muscle to reach the bone.

The mother’s cry was hideous yet pitiful. It echoed through the rainforest. She struggled vainly to get to the bank, not realizing she had been nearly severed from the girth to the hind legs. It held on to its prey till the victim’s strength weakened.

The prey fell to the ground, and the predator drew itself partly from the water to drag the remains. Scooping it up effortlessly with its jaws, it disappeared under the bloodstained water.

The bull and his harem, who had watched the bloody struggle, stood cowering like a deer herd after a lion’s attack.

2. The Behemoth - Head On!

 A small patch of rainforest land had been cleared to accommodate the crocodile farm in Nbokele. It had been small and illegal until a few years ago. But now it was licensed and lawfully recognized by the Congo authorities.

The Belfours ran the farm. Louis Belfour was the head of the farm, maimed in his right leg by a croc attack. He ran it through his two sons, Gerald and Joef along with the neighboring Bkangalasi tribesmen.

Gerald, the elder of the two, was the infield expert; it meant practicing as a vet, keeping accounts, etc. Joef, the younger one, was of the rugged type of an outfield expert. This meant raiding crocodile’s nests, skinning and capturing the reptiles if necessary.

Today, the farm was in a state of uproar. Louis and Gerald were all around the farm issuing orders, getting their workers moving. Joef was out in the jungle trapping crocs. This time, they had to get it right. A team of researchers and scientists from NIBS (Nature Intensive Biotic Study) were visiting the Belfour’s farm. NIBS funded many wildlife projects. In the past, the institute had funded the Belfour’s a couple of times, generously. So, if they satisfied NIBS today, funds would be granted.

The NIBS was also a billion-dollar wildlife magazine. This institute researched and studied various life forms on the planet, from the microscopic virus to the gargantuan whale and from the tiniest fungus to the gigantic redwood tree. All these findings were compiled in a monthly magazine accompanied by glossy photographs.

The magazine had been an instant hit with the public. Within three years, it received a million of subscribers from several continents. For the last fifteen years, it had been on the world’s top 10 magazine list.

To comply with the reader’s insatiable appetite, more and new information of organisms needed to be found. So every fortnight teams of researchers were deployed to the remotest places on the earth to study various forms of life. Each team was equipped with the state-of-the-art-technology in the form of communication, on spot field research instruments, survival equipment etc. Such was their sophisticated paraphernalia that it would make any third world country’s military system envious.

Gerald knew at least half a dozen teams scouring the globe. One team was in the Canadian Highlands checking for the Peary caribou, another in Guatemala trailing the Tamandua anteater. Another team of deep-ocean divers under the Cayman wall (Caribbean) researching the green-banded goby fish. Yet another team pursued the emu through the great Australian Desert...the list was endless. These thoughts excited him. If only he could get them to fund him for an individual project...but now his aim was to get a grant for the croc farm.

He gathered his thoughts and brought his mind to the work at hand. All around him was the sprawling jungle. It was turning evening and getting cold. White swirling mist had begun to descend from the highlands.

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The motorized dugout silently skimmed across the sluggish river. Joef Belfour studied intently the muddy river surface with a flashlight through the heavy mist and nocturnal torrential downpour. He handed the flashlight back to Bubu, his helper, while he sat poised scanning the river surface.

It had been hours past midnight, and yet they had not sighted a single croc. They never realized the absence of hippopotamuses, too. They could not fathom it. For years, this part of the Ybankazi would be abundant in young crocs several feet long. It also did not dawn on them they had ventured far out into the river, deep into the unexplored rainforest.

Joef felt cold and his muscles stiff. The downpour had infiltrated his clothes, drenching him in the skin. But at least this kept away the swarm of mosquitoes large as houseflies. He stretched, extracted a flask from his supplies, and guzzled a bit from it. The rum warmed him. He tossed it to Bubu and began to contemplate on ordering a return.

A suitable distance away, the river surface broke not by rain but by a tip of a crocodilian tail that grew visible.

“There....there...” Joef shouted over the sound of the rain. The bright band of light cut through the heavy curtain of rain, illuminating the tail.

It began to move towards the dugout. Joef adjudged the distance; it would be long moments before the reptile would be within reach. He causally readied himself, grasping the rudimentary crocodile trap of a stick with a noose at the end.

A moment later, Joef knew he had erred. The river surface rose into a miniature swell, flooding the dugout. From it thrust out the most enormous jaw Joef had ever seen. It was unexpected. *No croc or animal could move so fast, unless its snout was below the dugout!*

It is a hell of a long animal, was all the hunter could think at the moment.

The hull of the dugout splintered between the mighty jaws like a bone in a hyena’s jaws. It was mistaking the dugout for prey. Fear soared in the men, they leaped into the river. Their movements attracted the beast; it moved towards its prey, Joef.

Never had Joef been so terrified in his life, he screamed. The scream killed his chance of survival. The brute zeroed down on its prey. With hardly any effort, its jaws clamped on Joef’s torso, decapitating the head, which shot forward as if expelled by a weak cannon. Gulping the torso swiftly, it chased the dainty morsel—the decapitated head.

Bubu crossed the river with powerful strokes, blindly heading for the banks. He hurriedly climbed out and turned to watch. All he saw was an enormous dark reptilian shape chewing the dugout to smithereens. He turned and ran into the sanctity of the dark jungle; behind him, he heard the powerful bellow of rage. A crocodilian bellow. But he knew the animal was no crocodile. It was a creature from hell.

Bubu returned to camp the next evening, he had trekked all the way upstream. Yet he showed no signs of fatigue or exhaustion, only concern, bordering on fear. Nobody believed him. It was difficult to believe Joef was killed in a croc attack. He had on innumerable occasions warded away the largest reptile with a mere branch. But Bubu was wildly adamant; *Joef was killed by a huge croc!*

Bubu’s wife mended the walls of the hut with phrynium leaves as Gerald and Louis mused over the information. He looked terribly shaken up as he sat in a corner, still clothed in his soiled khaki shirt and pant.

Nothing could upset these tribesmen. These Bkangalasi were mortals who spent every single day facing dangers. A routine few were confronting the great mountain gorilla, side-stepping the jaws of a crocodile or a snake, evading the charge of the hippo, and surviving the vile creatures the rainforest could spew. The only thing that spooked them were myths like huge reptiles, mountain-size gorillas, etc.

Gerald looked once more at Bubu huddled in the corner, a dark form of despair. The sight depressed him; quickly, he emerged from the hut. He strongly believed in his brother’s survival technique. *Was a monster really out there or simply an overgrown croc? Had it killed his brother? What if Joef was lying wounded in the forest?* Such doubts assailed him.

There was only one way to find out. Lead a rescue team as soon as possible. But before he could do so, he needed to inform the neighboring tribal village of his missing brother. Maybe they had news.

Joef was a hit with everyone. There was always a likelihood he was yahooing around with the many mountain tribes. Gerald had to be certain before embarking on the rescue mission.

To get the news across village to village, it had to be done the jungle way; primitive telegraphy or talking drums. They made these drums from hollowed tree trunks with a slit at one end. With these instruments, drummers could imitate the rhythms and intonations of the local speech.

In return for this favor, he would have to send a pair of young crocs to the village headman. The headman simply loved tender croc flesh.

Lost in his thoughts, he idly walked towards the river. It was his favorite evening spot. He enjoyed watching the Bkangalasi fishermen collect their catch of fish for the day.

Their style of fishing was unique. Their equipment comprised a simple scaffolding-like structure. This they erected right in the center of the river. They would suspend cone shaped fish traps from scaffolds partly immersed in the river. Fishes swimming along the currents would be caught in these traps.

Before sunset, the fishermen would nimbly scramble down the narrow scaffold to collect their catch, oblivious to the raging river a few feet below. Their activities always reminded Gerald of the industrious jungle ants.

He broke away from the sight, returning to Joef’s absence. A rescue team had to be organized fast. It would soon be sunset; they would have to leave at least by sunrise. This would give him enough time to meet a certain Mr. Jodliker from the NIBS.

It was time to inform his father, the experienced man could supply some vital advice.

3. The Behemoth - The Evidence

The family of gorillas was aware of its presence in the river below. But they felt safe up on the twenty-foot foliage that nearly tunneled over the river. Nevertheless, the seven-foot male kept a wary eye on the gigantic predator below.

Down in the murky river it moved its huge dark and sinuous body, stationing itself just below the gorilla’s nest. It immersed its mighty body, keeping its six-foot head above the river's surface.

Instinctively, the male gorilla knew it waited for a slip and fall from one of those boisterous and troublesome youngsters. As long as they remained in the nest on the tree, they were safe. But such was not the case.

A youngster squabbling with another slipped from the nest. But was quick to grab a handhold and hung there.

Like a torpedo, the creature shot head first out of the water and into the air. Bridging a gap of over twelve-foot, it grabbed the young gorilla in its jaws. The mighty jaws clamped down with a pressure of several hundred pounds per inch, snapping the spinal cord and killing it all in one action.

Gripping its prey, it splashed back into the river like a metric tonne log.

The twilight jungle instantly broke out with the cacophony of gorilla cries, spreading like shockwaves through the jungle.

Later, after midnight, the troop from NIBS arrived. The rains too arrived in curtains. Mr. Jodliker turned out to be a Miss Cathy Jodliker and insisted on being called ‘CJ’.

Her skin was dark chocolate brown, somewhere along her bloodline it was evident she was Polynesian. She was five-foot something, muscular built, high cheekbones, slant eyes and thick sensuous lips.

Dressed in simple khaki trousers, shirt, and knee-high boots, she looked very safari-like. She was all leader and business type and handled her colleagues similarly.

Even after many hours of flight from the States, she neglected her jetlag to summon...nearly subpoena Gerald to her tent. She sat behind a specially erected desk in the light of an electric lamp.

The first thing Gerald noticed; she was without make-up. She was beautiful. In a way, she seemed to blend with the surroundings in the jungle. *Was it because of the color of her skin?* Yet he realized any man who assumed her beauty was her weakness was foolish.

“So Mr. Belfour,” she started, starched and ironed. “I believe your brother is lost... in an accident.”

“*So`n*...” he started in Portuguese. “Yes,” he quickly skipped to English.“The Bkanglashi, the one called Bubu, believes it’s an overgrown croc.”

 She studied him closely. “So, what are you going to do about it?”

His intelligence was at the test. “Croc or no croc, I am organizing a rescue team tomorrow at dawn...” He would not commit himself on the existence of the monster.

 “You mean today...” she cut in.

*Smart ass bitch!* He swore. It was past midnight, ‘today’ had started!

Before he could reply, she continued. “Mr Belfour, I will be in Nbokele for not more than a week. Get here before that.” It was not a mere statement, but an order. A veiled warning.

“Yes...” He nearly added ma’ am but bit his tongue. Such a curt bitch did not deserve any courtesy.

The dawn smelled humid with the passing whiff of decomposing vegetation. Mist was heavy in the air and shrouded the surroundings like jungle vines. The sun was yet to come up, but the tribesmen were busy mending nets of plant fiber. From the roofs wisps of smoke spewed out as manioc boiled or fish dried.

The rescue team comprised of Gerald, Bubu and a couple of other Bkangalashi tribesmen. They started down the river that Joef had used in a motorized dugout.

Sleeked shaped pirogues able to accommodate nine to twelve individuals flowed past them. The tribesmen cheerfully waved greetings to each other. Some would go to their scaffolds to set traps or would go deeper in the jungle to hunt the *mboloko*—antelope, a favorite source of meat.

Little after sunrise, the dugout reached the spot where the river widened and deepened; the branch of the river which Joef had started his croc hunting. All Gerald had to do was watch the banks for ‘croc trails.’

Crocodiles have this habit of coming out of the river to bask in the sun. In doing so, they favor a particular spot on the bank. In this process, they bulldoze through vegetation, leaving a telltale trail behind. The size of a croc can be gauged by the trail left behind.

 So all Gerald had to do was to look for a fairly large ‘croc trail’. Only then he would decide on his brother’s chance of survival. At various trails, he stopped to measure, but Bubu insisted they were way away from the occurrence.

By late morning, the sun burned with its usual vengeance, steam rose within the jungles. The heat was sweltering within minutes. The motorized dugout raced with uninterruptible speed towards the spot of Joef’s attack.

Past noon, the rain came down with ferocity, but the heat continued to be oppressive. The tributary they traveled had broadened wide enough to be called a river by itself. High impregnable walls of vegetation rose on either side. The usual primordial forest for centuries.

The river turned color, dark brown, silt laden. Gerald let the dugout flow with the current; the heavy rain was a mere annoyance.

The creature’s sense was not deterred by the dark brown river water. On the surface, it sensed movement, like a spider in its web.

Bubu called to attention. They had reached the spot where Joef had been attacked. Gerald killed the engine and let the vessel drift with the current.

With slow but powerful strokes, it began rising to the surface.

Gerald did not like the brown murky water around him, especially with the unseen predator close by. He wished the water would clear.

Below, it sensed its prey. Fragile, far smaller than itself; an easy target.

Suddenly the murky river spooked Gerald; involuntarily, he yanked the motor into action. The dugout shot forward, unbalancing all the men.

In a single swift movement, it lunged at its prey. The ten-foot croc did not have a chance. Within seconds, the mighty jaws crushed the reptile, killing it instantly. With lazy elegance it stuffed its prey, head first down its gigantic mouth. Belly full of croc and previously eaten gorilla, it submerged to the bottom.

The men looked bewildered at Gerald. He avoided their glance. *What had made him spooky?* He could not show his nervousness, for they would not rally under him. He killed the engine once again and let it drift.

Bubu sat contented. He was glad Gerald was spooked. It meant he was believing in the beast. He knew they had passed the accident site by miles. The tribesman also knew the dead man’s brother was trying to gain respect from his men. He was not doing well as Joef but he was trying.

At dawn, the next day they continued down the river for an hour or so till it got fast and nasty. Ahead was a waterfall, moving the dugout carefully; they reached a spot where the river had stashed a lot of flotsam against a margin of protruding rocks.

Immediately, Gerald ordered a search among the flotsam. Sometime later, a Bkangalasi came up with a piece of wood, a piece of the motorized dugout.

Evidence was all over it. The vessel had hot crashed; it had been crushed effortlessly, like a chewed toothpick. No hippo could do it. These bites were not two punctured marks but clean serrated marks like those on a bone. Only this was not a bone, it was several inches thick palm wood. Neither a croc could do it, crocs cannot chew. A croc grasps its prey and rolls over and over, twisting, till they tear off a morsel to swallow it whole. They cannot splinter wood so effortlessly.

*What had done it?* Gerald suddenly felt panic set in him*-the death roll*. The waterfall tumbled into a space of nearly thirty feet before it hit the jungle floor. Its sound was deafening. And the river was not navigable. Securing the vessel, they combed downstream on foot.

By dusk, they were exhausted, and their efforts were fruitless. Gerald decided to set camp for the night on land. Early the next morning, they would leave of Nbokele. In reality, Gerald did not want a nocturnal encounter with whatever worked on the crushed dugout.

Early the next morning, he whipped the dugout to its highest speed. He had to leave these waters as soon as possible. Bubu hunched down in satisfaction. Now everybody would believe him. He idly watched the dark kerosene exhaust emitting from the dugout.

Deep below in the river bed, the creature was aware of the movement above. Scenting the unpalatable kerosene odor, it let the swift moving prey pass unmolested.

4. The Behemoth - The Close Encounter

Cathy and her team of experts at the camp examined the splintered dugout. The skeptics were checking the tooth marks, making sure they were natural. It would take them a few hours.

Gerald and Bubu stood in the background. The father had taken the misfortune bravely. Till they found no corpse, all harbored optimistic hopes. Gerald also noticed his father had grown pensive. This worried him.

At last, the NIBSians were ready to give their verdict. The lab technician began. “We have taken saliva samples from the wood; the results confirm it is reptilian.”

 “But no croc can splinter wood like a toothpick! Not this type of wood,” began Cathy, speaking aloud. “Unless a hyena is crossed with a croc!”

There was feeble laughter in the tent.

“This is no laughing matter!” A voice spoke and everybody in the tent turned their sights on Louis. “Yes, there is something out there,” he continued, “something huge, a behemoth…a dinosaur!”

The NIBSians stared at him like he had gone insane. Gerald touched his father’s arm, but the old man brushed it off.

“This thing, we are dealing with…” he started, “is a dinosaur—a mosasaur. These dinosaurs or aquatic lizards were about ten to twelve meters in length. Mosasaurs were many times more than the size of our modern-day crocs. They had powerful jaws and sharp teeth. They fed mainly on shellfish which had turtle-like hard shells. Yet, these reptiles would crush them effortlessly and eat the soft flesh within the shells...”

Louis stopped to catch his breath.

The silence in the tent was attentive. Cathy was the first to speak; she spoke with patience as if to a child. “And what makes you say so, Mr. Belfour? Have you seen it?”

They all stared incredulously at him when he nodded. Gerald quickly realized his father’s scheme. His father had not given up hope. The best way to find Joef was a massive air hunt. The Belfours did not have such kind of resource but the NIBSians did. Cathy would set the search for the dinosaur, but indirectly, the search would cover Joef’s disappearance. *Clever Old Man!*

“How can this mosasaur survive for millions of years?” she started. “Don’t give me the Rainforest Unexplored Theory and Surviving Dinosaurs...” she continued her tirade, her patience waning. “We have enough crackpots with such idiocy!”

Gerald felt anger burn his cheeks. He fell silent as his father began speaking.

“But aren’t crocs the descendants of dinosaurs?” Started Louis, his patience not waning. “In fact, crocs are dinosaurs with identical physiology! Through the ages of evolution, the dinosaur grows fitter and is better equipped to adapt to the surroundings. Their genes passed on to the next generation and the next until it was perfected. Let’s not forget,” continued the croc expert, “while all other dinosaurs grew extinct, the croc survived and thrived. It means that the croc is an heir of all dinosaurs’ traits. If this can be agreed on, surely it is possible that the genes of some crocs, by some freak accident of nature, reversed-the-gene-sequence. And this freak accident of nature reversed the gene sequence, and a mosasaur is born....”

He rested before going on further. “Aren’t there cases of perfect and even handsome human couples having children with the likeness of an ape? After all, humans are direct descendants of primates, are we not? The theory of the Reversal of Gene sequence was put forward by world renowned Biologist Opirtita, and was supported by many....”

“That was a very good hypothesis, Mr. Belfour!” Cathy said, genuinely. “But I think you claimed to have seen this... dinosaur.... this Mosasaur...”

“Sure Ms Jodliker... I have seen it and also touched it. In fact, I watched it emerging from the egg.”

Now everyone in the tent was staring at him in bewilderment.

“About five-six years ago, it was breeding season of the crocs. The river banks were abundant with croc’s nest. I would move through them watching, studying and recording, but careful of mama croc. At one particular spot, I was in time to see a mother carrying away a few of her hatchlings. As she moved away, I began inspecting the nest. Two eggs cracked and young crocs emerged. One of it was peculiar, eel-like. It had no distinct trunk, just a head attached to a long tail. A deformity, I presumed, but then I realized I was wrong. I was watching a mutation, a completely new species of reptiles. For this little fellow had no clawed feet like an ordinary croc, it had paddles like the appendages of a crab. It fascinated me. I knew I had to have it, protect it, for it may have not survived in the wild. I tried to grab the little fellow, but it turned to me with gaping jaws...” He stopped to take his breath and Gerald observed that none in the tent had shifted.

Tiredly Louis began, “Even being little as eight inches, it was aggressive. Its jaws, in particular, were perilous porcelain white teeth but razor sharp. I grabbed it like a snake behind its head and watched closely. Engrossed in my find, I had got careless. Mama croc stole from behind and grabbed my ankle. I dropped the little dinosaur as she twisted my leg, breaking it in two places. I grabbed a stick and jabbed her in her eyes, only then she let go of me. Had it not been a concern for her clutch, she would surely have killed me.”

For a full minute, all eyes were on him, then he was assaulted with questions.

The red and silver Maule skyrocket M-6, a biplane, droned in the bright blue cloudless sky. Below lay the sprawling dark green rainforest interlaced with brown-blue ribbons of water.

Inside the biplane, Bubu sat behind the pilot. Opposite to him were Gerald and Cathy. A technician hovered around them, setting up the sonar.

They placed two monitor screens before them, one receiving the sonar readings and the other filming the landscape below. The camera and the sonar receiver were mounted under the craft between the two floaters.

It had taken just two days for Cathy to gain the accessories for the mosasaur-hunt, Behemoth-Hunt they named it. She and her team had drilled Louis for hours; only when she was convinced did she contact her HQ in Seattle. The process was set in progress. All they needed was a day to get through customs and red tape. The equipment which arrived was again all state-of-the-art. For they knew the discovery of such a beast would get them worldwide acclaim.

The technician asked Cathy to order the pilot to fly lower for the sonar to function efficiently. It could track the mosasaur underwater, like tracking a submarine. The sonar was programmed to pick up images of sizes over fifteen-foot.

“Get her lower.” Cathy ordered the pilot. The biplane banked lower towards the river.

It was late noon; Louis sat poring over a tome. He wanted all possible information on dinosaurs. A particular sentence caught his eye; Mosasaurs leaped from below, high above the water surface, to pluck prey out of the skies.

For a moment, Louis stared at the sentence. It meant trouble for the mosasaur-hunters; they had taken a biplane—an Amphibian. Such an aircraft was meant to land on the water and fly several feet above the river. The hunters assumed this reptile had the characteristic of a crocodile. If this reptile was truly a mosasaur, then the hunters were in trouble. He had to radio them.

5. The Behemoth - The Search Begins

The noon heat inside the plane was stifling when the sonar picked up a signal from the river. Something was moving below. The river had broadened and deepened. Silent, feverish excitement grew in the plane. The river was swift and murky, brown with sediments. The yellowish elongated dash on the sonar screen moved in unison with them.

“Go slower.” Cathy ordered, her eyes fixed on the screen. “And lower.” She added.

The pilot expertly maneuvered the aircraft below the treetops. A dark shadow began forming beneath the water. Their sights moved from the sonar screen to the camera-mounted screen.

Slowly, they could discern its length; it was over twenty-foot long.

“Lower...” she ordered. The biplane dipped and continued to keep the low altitude. Now its entire length of over twenty-foot, and its six-foot, dark gray, smooth girth was visible.

“Down…down.” She croaked, her voice feverish with excitement.

 The creature raised its ugly, huge croc-like head above the surface of the water. Just then, the radio crackled to life. “Come in …Maule M-6…Come in…over.”

Gerald recognized his father’s voice. But like the others, he was caught up in fascination with the brute below.

Once again, Cathy ordered the plane lower.

Once again, Louis’ voice came over the radio.

“Maule M-6 here…over.” The pilot answered.

“Maule M-6, have you found it…? Over.”

The brute was rising, looking terrible but fantastic like a submarine, water streaming off its back.

“Yeah pa…,” Gerald began, but Cathy snatched the radio and spoke curtly, “Listen Nbokele we will talk to you later…over.”

“Listen Maule M-6…” Louis’ voice came over, urgency fraught in his voice. “Whatever you do don’t fly below the tree tops…I repeat, Maule M-6, whatever you do, don’t fly below the tree tops… over.”

“Why Nbokele...? Why…? Over.”Cathy asked.

“Just do it. Maule M-6... Just do it.” Alarm rising in his voice.

Gerald looked at Cathy. “Do it ... do it,” she ordered. She was beginning to trust the old man’s intuition.

The pilot pulled back the throttle, and the craft lifted sharply. Instantly, a dull reptilian bellow sounded from below. The river surface broke as it hurled itself after its fleeing prey. Its jaws just clamped a small corner of the biplane’s floater.

The craft shuddered violently, tilting nearly to one side. Then it began to descend, weighed down by the metric tonne body.

The occupants in the craft fell to one side, experiencing acute fear in the descent. Somewhere along the fall, they heard a metallic crunch as the floater gave way. With the severed piece of floater still in its jaws, the monster began falling into the water.

The occupants felt weightless. The pilot grasped the throttle, trying to get it in line.

With a tremendous splash, the monster hit the river. Twin walls of water rose like tidal waves, smashing against the tiny craft. The biplane quivered with the impact in the air and miraculously landed on its single floater. The pilot eased the craft on the river surface like an expert water skier.

Twisting around, it turned to give chase to the fleeting craft. These few seconds of delay were precious to the craft. It rose to take off.

The monster reached sniffing distance, stretching full length to catch the airborne craft. But like all its crocodilian-kind, it had overexerted itself, so the second leap was out of the question. Yet, it chased the craft from below in the river, exhibiting itself in full profile to the occupants.

They watched it with fear and fascination. The enormous crocodilian snout measuring over seven-foot long, yawning jaws lined with rows of dagger-like teeth. Its girth at the thickest was six-foot which tapered to the end in two.

The complete torso moved through the water in quick knots. Its eyes were dark yellow and the size of baseballs, its grayish paddles were the size of mini airplane wings. The river seemed to have shrunk before its enormous size.

Gradually it immersed into the river, defeated.

All sat silent in the craft, too shocked. Slowly, Gerald placed a hand on the pilot’s shoulder, a thankful gesture. The radio crackled, actively. “Maule M-6 come in, Maule M-6 come in ... over.”

“Yes... Maule M-6... here, over,” answered the pilot immediately.

 “What was it? Everything’s ok Maule M-6... Over,” asked the radio.

“Fine Nbokele…fine, we are returning. Over,” answered the shaken pilot. Leaving the tributary, they headed back to camp. This time, he kept the aircraft high above the jungle canopy.

There was no visible sign of shock on Cathy. A little later, she called for a private NIBSian meeting.

She then summoned Gerald, Louis, and Bubu for a separate meeting. As expected, she was going after the mosasaur, to trap it alive and show it to the world. She said it would be a major discovery, sure to create havoc in the world of science. It would give the paleontologists a closer look at the missing link in the evolution of dinosaurs. She spoke as if she was doing science a favor.

Then it was their turn to be showered with her favor, coupled with a condition. She promised the three of them a good amount of cash on the announcement of the discovery. But they had to keep it a secret till then. The NIBsians, Belfours and Bubu would be the only parties to know of the existence of the living mosasaur. Secrecy was the key to their success.

Then she grew grim and began speaking about the funds. NIBS would have to pour funds into this project and how she would have to twist arms to get the funds...

Gerald was ready to puke at her talks. She sounded as if she was into charity work. Funds would be invested not poured. Anything invested was meant to get returns in two folds, three folds... several folds.

Cathy and her kin—the NIBS would put out this reptile like a circus. Mere exhibition fee would comfortably cover the invested funds, besides other innumerable perks. The mosasaur was a hundred times better than a gold mine. It would be a money-spinner.

So, when Gerald asked for a seven-figure cheque, she agreed and promised to put it on paper as soon as she was ready.

Within a day a patch of land was cleared close to the mosasaur territory. The timber acquired was utilized to build a shed, a makeshift HQ. This would house the huge amount of electronic equipment to arrive. It would be the nerve center in this mosasaur hunt and would be referred to as Behemoth-Hunt or simply BH for security reasons.

Three days later, a huge contingent of goods arrived sans the manpower. After all, *Secrecy was the key!* The Bkangalashis, NIBsians and Belfours burdened their shoulders like menial laborers.

They erected a temporarily electrified fence around the camp. This was mainly as a deterrent for natives and rogue animals rather than theft. Dish antennas mushroomed all over the place. Dark power cables snaked all over, threatening to trip anyone with a careless step.

Six unmanned cameras festooned strategic trees all along the river banks sending live pictures of the mosasaur habitat. Again, these cameras were imprisoned in electrified cages, as a deterrent.

Six monitors always stayed wide-eyed in the makeshift HQ to show the mosasaur’s antics. Each of the NIBsians took a six-hour watch round the clock.

6. The Behemoth - The Underwater Cage

Colonel Suboti was a tall, heavily built, hard featured man. His skin was the color of tar. His love was money and women. And sadism, which he generally mistook for machismo. He was commissioned by the government to control illegal poaching and rebels. But he believed Nbokele was his serfdom and ruled it likewise.

For days he had watched the hectic activities going on at the Belfour’s farm. If the Belfour’s farm was transformed into a beehive of activity, then it meant money. If the Belfours made money, then he was entitled to a share. After all, they made it from his land. He would pay them a visit.

Colonel Suboti’s arrival sent a tremor of fear through the Belfour’s camp. The lords never visited the serfs, it was vice versa. Gerald hurried and greeted the Colonel with deep apprehension.

“What monkey is going on here?” The Colonel asked in Portuguese, with a smirk.

“Research…” Gerald mumbled.

“Research?” The Colonel repeated. “What you reckon me to be a bull head?”

“Get the colonel in here, Mr. Belfour.” Cathy’s voice rang from behind before Gerald could speak. The colonel’s eyes gleamed like gems at the sight of Cathy. He simply walked past Gerald. She smiled at the approaching colonel.

Gerald felt like protecting her, but she did not seem intimidated by his presence. As she led the Colonel to her office, Gerald felt envious.

Less than an hour later, the Colonel emerged carrying a leather case, pleased. The serfs had paid their taxes, the lords were satisfied. So pleased was the Colonel that he actually smiled at Gerald as the jeep drove away.

The pilot was first to put a spoke in the wheel. He suddenly grew cold feet to fly the plane, a vital necessity in the B-Hunt. The truth was, he had watched the Behemoth on the monitor. The horrors and nightmares came alive to him. He wanted to back off from the deal. For nearly an hour, Cathy tried to convince him, but in vain, and then she released him.

Two hours later, he was intercepted by the colonel’s men and arrested before he could enter the city. An hour later, colonel Suboti’s man came to Cathy to collect the money for the colonel’s service.

A day later, NIBS sent a replacement for the pilot, a Mr. Jerkins. The man was tall, well-built, and had a military bearing in his personality. Yet, there was a streak of indiscipline in him-a mercenary. He stayed close to Cathy, like a bodyguard. It gave Gerald a queasy feeling as well as envy. She was gathering too many hard-necks, first the sadist colonel, now the muscle-bound Jerkins. He felt caring for her. He liked and disliked the feeling.

For, over two days the mosasaur image did not come over the monitors. Panic set among the NIBSians. It was the first time Gerald saw Cathy, anything but calm. Several hippos were slaughtered and their blood was poured into the river. Hoping to arouse the behemoth, but it stubbornly did not come.

“O Jeez!” Cathy exclaimed, “Let it not be another case of Loch Ness!”

The next day it appeared on the monitor, munching on the blubber of a hippo.

They decided to ‘cage’ the mosasaur a kind of ‘house arrest.’ Two ends of the river would be caged in with titanium (Ti) poles. But giving the mosasaur plenty of swimming space. This would be extremely dangerous work. Any vibration in the river was enough of an invitation for the mosasaur.

It was noticed the mosasaur grew sluggish after a meal. It would be then they would build the underwater ‘cage’. A freshly killed hippo carcass was anchored downstream as bait. A computer was hooked to a satellite; it ‘panned’ over approximately half a mile of the river with the carcass roughly in the center.

Anything longer than four meters and motile would be picked up by the satellite. No matter how many several meters deep, an image would be sent over the computer-an elongated dash.

Soon the much sought-after dash appeared on the monitor and moved towards the carcass.

Walkie-talkies came alive in the Nbokele camp, signaling the group upstream to build the ‘cage.’ Jerkins, Gerald, Cathy and a Kepler—the cameraman, dressed in skin diver suits, assembled upstream with a bunch of tribesmen. A pile of four-foot long, three-inch-thick Ti-rods lay on the bank. A highly sophisticated underwater drill lay at hand; ready to be used by Jerkins.

As soon as the news of the mosasaur came over the radio, the four put on their earpieces and adjusted the headlights on their helmets. The earpieces would give out a series of beeps in three stages, depending how close the behemoth was. They silently dropped into the river. The water was brown, muddy and visibility poor. Everything appeared dark and ominous.

Jerkins signaled Gerald to put on his headlight. Sharp light stabbed the silt filled river, increasing visibility a lot more. Sediment particles danced all around them. They seemed to be in a strange, unreal world. Fishes and other aquatic creatures darted as the four swam to the river bed.

Gerald’s muscles and senses were taut, half-expecting the beep to go on. *What if the satellite malfunctioned? What if the earpiece developed battery problems? What if there was a pair of Mosasaurs?* Such doubts raced through his mind. He chased them out. Why was the river bed taking so long to appear?

Jerkins had briefed them before the dive; the spot they had chosen was the narrowest roughly thirty-forty feet wide and about thirty-foot deep. For a day, he had taught them how to fix the pieces of the Ti-rods. One fitted into the other, with push bolts locking them in place. It was as easy as a child’s mechanical-set.

The river bottom was practically empty except for a croc, which fled on seeing them. Jerkins drew out his drill and began punching holes into the bed. A net filled with Ti-rods was silently lowered down. Gerald, Cathy and Kepler began converting the 4-foot rods into 16-foot by joining each end together. 10-foot of each beam would disappear into the river bed.

Gerald remembered Jerkins briefing them on the rods. Fitting the rods on the land would be hard work. Each piece weighed easily over eight kgs, but underwater, due to the water’s up thrust, the rods would weigh exceedingly less. And so it was when Gerald hefted it; it had lost a good amount of weight.

Soon along the river bed eight gleaming vertical Ti-poles, six-foot each jutted from the bottom. The beeping started in the earpieces. Quickly, the foursome dropped the equipment and kicked to the surface. There tribesmen hastily hauled them out.

For an hour, they renewed their strength and watched the river, but did not see the behemoth. Though they were informed that it had come about ten to fifteen feet near their work site.

Later, the all-clear signal was given. Once again, they dropped into the river; they found the Ti-poles unmolested. They began to build the vertical poles which reached the river's surface. Again, they dropped to the bottom and began setting up a horizontal line.

Barely had they erected three lines when the beeper began screaming in their ears. The third signal! It meant they had missed the first two signals. A fatal malfunction!

They looked at each other with uncertainty and fear. Jerkins stabbed wildly a finger again and again through the water, beckoning them to look behind.

Through the pall of gloom, sediments appeared to merge together and take a gigantic shape.

Jerkins slipped on the other side of the barrier, and Gerald pushed Cathy through. A dark and huge shape came closer. Gerald moved to follow Cathy when he remembered his headlight. He switched it off in a quick movement. Just then, he felt an immense wall of water press against him. The behemoth was no further than a few yards from him. It would be suicidal to move.

Gerald grew tense and became one with the Ti-bars. Slowly, he dared to open his eyes; it was oddly dark all about him. It was moments before he realized he was obscured by the huge reptile’s body.

Above him was the mosasaur. Its broad snout was like the hull of a ship. Cruel white teeth emerged, the size itself was terrifying. Fear strangulated his throat from within. The behemoth bumped into the rods but ignored them.

It moved lower and watched Gerald at a distance of a few feet. The eyes glowed as if dusted with phosphorescence. Gerald bit his tongue to prevent himself from screaming. It was a meanest looking crocodilian he had ever seen. The glaring match continued for seconds but seemed an eternity to Gerald.

Suddenly, the mosasaur broke the contest, distracted. It took a moment for Gerald to realize the source of distraction—Kepler. He was kicking towards the surface; the camera guy had lost his nerve. Gerald stood frozen to the spot.

With a powerful burst, the mosasaur went after its prey, forcing another bone crushing wall of water against Gerald. All he saw was a dark silhouette. It resembled a gargantuan new born fledging; especially the paddles, which appeared like featherless wings.

In a moment, the reptile reached Kepler and grasped him in its mighty jaws. Taking its struggling prey, it disappeared into the gloom. All that remained was the slow descent of his underwater camera.

The trio watched the particles of sediments lazily swirling in the water. Slowly, Gerald released his taut body, only then he was aware of the beeper screaming in his ears. He kicked to the surface, occasionally turning behind, half-expecting the gloomy water to take a dark huge shape.

He reached the surface, and even before he could remove his mask, he was throwing up.

7. The Behemoth - The Test Run

Cathy’s passivity towards Kepler’s death angered Gerald. He strode to the technician and demanded the reason for the earpieces malfunctioning.

It happens, was all the answer he received. Gerald glared at Cathy. His eyes said it all. He walked away.

“What really went wrong?” Cathy asked Jerkins when they were alone.

“Water sometimes momentarily blocks the satellite waves....” he explained. “It happens occasionally without reason...”

“Good,” she replied. *At least I got rid of Kepler. The man was getting unreliable. Soon we have to start eliminating other unwanted characters too.*

Cathy wanted the existence of the mosasaur to be a tight secret. The fewer knew it, the better. Even the knowledgeable few had to be trustworthy by her standards. So, her NIBSians colleagues were dependable, till the pilot wanted out. She knew she could not let him go free, not with the knowledge of the mosasaur, not before she had shifted the animal. So, she had had him temporarily detained.

Kepler, on the other hand, was found making duplicate prints of the mosasaur. It alarmed her. She could not discredit him for the fear of alerting him. She wanted to be sure who his cahoots were and what was their interest in this project. So he was on her hit list. Fortunately, the mosasaur had done the job for her.

Then there was Gerald. He was ambitious; she had realized it from day one. It alarmed her; she was like him a few years ago. He had to go. She would have done away with him earlier, but she needed him now and in the future. He would go as soon as his usefulness was over. And the father could forget the seven-figure fee and the acclaim in the mosasaur discovery.

Kepler’s death dispirited the entire operation. Gerald flatly refused to enter the river, with the behemoth lurking in its murky depths.

Jerkins and Cathy were shaken, but they tried vainly to hide it. For a day, they sat in the camp monitoring the behemoth’s whereabouts. It was unusually active, frequently swimming from end to end, but its presence was unseen on the surface. Then Cathy came up with an idea, she decided to tranquilize the reptile just enough, to set up the ‘cage’ on the other end. This was at least safe.

The next morning, Gerald harnessed himself at the door-way of the newly fixed biplane. He held a tranquilizer rifle in his hand. It was his job to tranquilize the beast. Jerkins piloted the biplane and Cathy monitored the reptile’s presence.

They scoured half the length of the river, hopelessly, without getting a bearing on the mosasaur.

Much later, a yellowish dash appeared on the screen. Cathy’s call was a joyous yelp.

The beast had picked up the dull droning of the craft and could not resist its primeval instinct. Its huge shape grew out of the water. The size was terrifying. Gerald remembered the huge ugly head, its closeness... in the river. The rifle turned slippery in his palms. Now it was his call. “Let’s make a pass over it.” He stammered.

The biplane zoomed over it. Gerald watched its serpentine body, recollected its leap. Its yellow eyes suddenly seemed fixed on Gerald. He felt the icy stare in his bones.

“Go lower,” he ordered, “behind its head.”

Jerkins expertly swerved the biplane behind the reptile, minimizing any chance of a leap. He dipped the plane earthwards like a WWII fighter plane. Gerald aimed the rifle. He could not miss.

The dart buried itself in the reptile’s scaly hide, but the brute hardly noticed it.

They did not stall for another moment, the rest, they would watch on the monitor.

It was minutes before the drug began to work. The yellow dash on the monitor slowly came to a standstill.

Quarter of an hour later, they were underwater fixing the cage. They worked about barely twenty meters from where the behemoth lay. It appeared like an enormous locomotive engine, lying waiting and waiting.

They built the cage of only vertical bars, and left.

Cathy could not resist swimming for a closer look at the beast. She looked puny, like a firefly before a chameleon. It seemed any moment it would awake and swallow her.

Once out on the river bank, she promised Gerald a bonus. Minutes later, the yellow dash grew sluggish and then motile. The giant reptile was safely caged.

Louis had always wondered about the difficulties of transporting the beast out of the jungle. They would need a container large enough to contain the mosasaur. Then a vehicle to carry it out of the jungle, preferably a truck, but the rough roads and narrow pathways would make it impossible to accommodate a vehicle so huge. An airplane would be adequate, but again it did not have the hovering quality needed to stay while the behemoth would be lifted in...

Gerald had pondered over these thoughts. But somehow, he knew Cathy would counter all these difficulties. And she did.

“Ever heard of a V-22 Tiltrotor?” Jerkins asked, almost professor-like. Cathy stood in the background. She had summoned all the NIBSians and Belfours for the briefing about the shifting the behemoth.

Jerkins continued, “A V-22 Tiltrotor is a combination of a plane and chopper. Capable of carrying enormous cargo, flying high altitudes...”

As he spoke, he flicked on a switch and an image of an aircraft appeared on the screen. The aircraft resembled a chopper and its rear a plane.

“The V-22 is designed to replace choppers but carries several times its load,” he continued. “It has the hovering capability of a chopper. With a landing requirement of a plane, but needing a much shorter runaway. Our aircraft is very much like the V-22, only several times larger and many times more load bearing capacity. It is a prototype, known as Y-36.”

As he spoke, the Tiltrotor image faded away from the screen. It was replaced by an animated scene of the rainforest and river Ybankazi. A moment later, a caricature of Gerald appeared carrying a tranquilizer and riding an animated aircraft, the Y-36. A cute little mosasaur appeared in the river and the Gerald character shot it. Next, the Y-36 dropped gigantic slings which were slipped around the reptile and pulled up.

Cathy took over the explanation. “The belly of the Y-36 has an inbuilt tank to house the Behemoth. This tank would be filled with water, and oxygen would be pumped in to last for the journey.”

The scene on the monitor changed, and a map of Africa appeared. It zoomed in on Congo (Nbokele). An arrowhead appeared, tracing a path westwards into the country of Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, and ending in the Atlantic Ocean. Here, a frigate would wait to carry its burden into the US. There, an artificial reservoir was being prepared to house the giant reptile.”

All that was needed now was to get the mosasaur into the Y-36 unharmed. To assure this, they would attempt at least two test runs. The first attempt would be to fly to Gabon maybe halfway into Congo, depending how the mosasaur responded.

If successful, the next attempt would be to go into Equatorial Guinea right up to the Atlantic Ocean.

Few weeks later, the first test-run day arrived and so did the Y-36. It was a huge craft, like an aerial mosasaur. The craft was painted with jungle green military camouflage.

Its interior was tight as an ambulance, offering space just enough for the patient and a few attendants. Gerald was there mainly to tranquilize the behemoth and then monitor the unconscious patient through the test run.

Tranquilizing was easy. Now came the tough part, loading the brute into the aircraft. He watched uneasily as a dozen of NIBSians donned in skin-diving suits appeared on the banks. Cathy looked nervous, too.

About six NIBSians with hydraulics’ underwater drills dropped just above the resting beast.With Jerkins leading the way. Aiding them were the best able-bodied tribesmen.

At the narrowest end of the beast, four of the drillers began drilling. But instead of going straight down, they adjusted their drills at an angle on either side. It was what oil miners called a ‘slant drill’. It was usually done when they encountered a layer of hard rock over an oil deposit or oil bed.

But here the ‘slant drill’ was done for a reason. A tunnel was being constructed under the river bed. They laced a heavy detachable sling through this tunnel, locking it up until it had completely encompassed the lower end of the beast’s body. The same method they worked on the upper end, just below the beast's neck.

The Y-36 continued to hover over the river like a hummingbird. It was minutes before they resurfaced to give the thumbs up-all clear sign.

Jerkins in the cockpit pulled a lever, and the cables connected to the slings rolled upwards. The hovering aircraft shifted slightly as the mosasaur rose to the surface and stopped. The cables refused to budge. There was a sound of metal grating and the aircraft shifted violently.

Slowly, the cable rode upwards to life, hauling the mega tonne beast into the air. Water cascaded heavily off the brute’s back. Gerald gasped at the size and for a moment panic flowed in him, but its restfulness assured him otherwise. The huge mosasaur completely filled the belly of the aircraft, giving Gerald a claustrophobic feeling.

Once inside, metallic doors rolled down all around the mosasaur securing an airtight room. Only the partition between Gerald and the beast was transparent.

Slowly the craft descended and ducts dropped into the river to draw water. The slow purring of the pumps began and river water flooded into the tank. It was a tight squeeze for the reptile, so as its body pressed against the tank walls. These were special sensitive material that gave readings over the monitor.

Once the tank was full, Gerald gave an all-clear sign. Laboriously, the Y-36 rose, wobbling precariously like a pregnant woman.

Minutes later, they were airborne high above the rainforest.

Hours later, they released the mosasaur back into the river. The first run was successful. They had flown all the way into Congo and back.

The second test run was to be held a week later.

8. The Behemoth - The Final Conflict

A week later, the Y-36 hovered over Nbokele camp as Cathy and Gerald hurried to be airlifted into it, the tranquilizer rifle safely around his shoulder. He was puzzled to see a few more tranquilizer rifles on the plane. *Why did they need these additional arms,* he wondered.

Once again, over the Ybankazi it flew, the river’s brown water sparkling beside the dark green rainforest.

Gerald sat harnessed to the doorway, armed with the tranquilizer. Cathy sat in the cock-pit with Jerkins, monitoring the whereabouts of the reptile.

An hour later, a yellow dash appeared on the screen. She gently nudged Jerkins, who nodded in acknowledgment.

It grew longer as she watched silently. She watched it rising from the bed, reading the depth from the screen. Turning, she watched Gerald; the man had his sights on the river surface.

Silently, she unbuckled herself and arose from her boot. She unsheathed a foot long hunting knife. She looked at the screen. They were nearly over the reptile. With the knife clenched in her grasp, she moved carefully towards Gerald.

The river below began to grow a shadow; Gerald knew the animal was rising. *Why hadn’t Cathy alerted him?* He turned; Cathy was over him with the knife rising in the air. In a jiffy he realized, she would kill him and throw him in the river to the mosasaur. Make it look like an accident; wipe out all the evidence...It now dawned on him why the additional guns were on board. The duo had brought as protection against the monster.

His senses screamed. Kill the bitch! He turned his bulky tranquilizer on her. She realized, in panic, the weapon held enough of the drug to kill her instantly.

He had not brought up his rifle far enough when Jerkins tilted the craft. Gerald lost his balanced and slipped over the edge.

Cathy, quick in reflex, grabbed a handrail and clung on to it.

Gerald stumbled over the edge and fell into space. But for a few feet, to his surprise and relief, he felt a tug. The harness held him. He was suspended high in the air.

The shadow took a serpentine shape in the river beneath him.

He gritted his teeth, yelling curses at the duo. He was being towed by the craft over the river. Cathy’s head appeared over the doorway. “Good bye Mr. Belfour,” she yelled over the sound of the wind.

Gerald raised his rifle to blow her head, but she quickly retreated. He knew what she was doing. Cutting the harness, he could feel the vibrations.

Below, he saw the pair of yellow eyes watch hungrily at him. He struggled, shouting and pleading. It would be better if they would simply shoot him than kill him in such a way. The nightmares surged out, shooting panic in him.

He screamed like a possessed man when the harness was severed from the craft.

The behemoth reared out his jaws from the river and bellowed triumphantly, as if to mock him. Still screaming, Gerald watched in terror the huge pinkish maw lined with razor-sharp teeth that opened below him. In a few seconds, the teeth would serrate him as easily as an electric saw through bacon.

In complete desperation, he tossed his body out of the way. Landing with a hard bump on the reptile’s snout, he tumbled all over its back to hit the water. He was hardly aware of the long gash on his arm from one of the reptile’s lethal teeth.

He instantly began to swim towards the bank. The reptile in frenzy bellowed and turned, the warm blood in its jaws excited it. From above Cathy watched in fear and fascination, the huge reptile pursue its prey. Its cave-like jaws were opened, river water flowing through it as it gained swiftly on Gerald.

Suddenly, a dull scream broke out from the forest. Gerald looked up to see Bubu. He rushed out with an eight-foot lance in his hands, akin to a medieval dragon-slayer. Plunging into the river, he jabbed the lance into the mosasaur muscular snout. The reptile reared, more stunned than in pain. It was a skin wound.

Cathy, watching from above, swore violently as he tried again to jab it. She tore the pistol holstered from Jerkins’ hip and trained it on Bubu.

Gerald, till now, was mainly concerned with his own safety, barely realizing the peril Bubu was in. Then he heard the shots. Two shots hit the water. The third hit Bubu on his shoulder. He dropped the lance.

The angered dinosaur grabbed the wrist-thick lance between its jaws and crushed it like a toothpick. Then it grabbed Bubu head first and reared up with its struggling prey, like a victorious athlete. Gerald turned to see the behemoth toss the half-severed torso of Bubu in the river like mulch.

Fear turned to anger. Hatred to vengeance. This was the brave man who had sacrificed his life. This was the cursed beast that had killed his brother. He had to kill the damned beast. He had to avenge Bubu and Joef’s death. Then he realized the tranquilizer still hung around his chest.

The behemoth swam towards him. Its huge crocodilian head out of the water, its serrated-askew teeth still blood stained-Bubu’s blood. It was a sight enough to strike fear in any man’s heart, but Gerald stood in composure, rifle ready. He would take the bastard in his eye. It was the most vulnerable spot. From a close distance, the projectile could be lethal. It would shatter the eye, penetrate the brain, and kill the beast agonizingly.

Above the Y-36 orbited, he looked up at its occupants and smiled wickedly. The mere smile told her his intent.

“Nooo....,” she screamed and leveled the pistol.

The beast reared, several meters above the river surface, as if to frighten the puny Gerald. But he stayed calm. From above, Cathy set off a wild round of shots. Bullets rained around him like hailstones, but he stood his ground.

He let the beast come close… close enough. Then aimed at the eye and pressed the trigger. The tranquilizer shattered the eye and an ugly bellow resounded from the reptile. It fell into the river as if to soothe its damaged eye and disappeared within seconds. Gerald whooped a cry of joy and victory. Cathy’s face turned ugly and vicious. She let go another round of shells on Gerald. It was only then two hit him in the chest. The rifle slipped from his hand and he fell into the river, blood gushing from his bullet holes, he seemed to be smiling.

“Bastard!” she screamed with disgust and flung the empty weapon earthwards. She saw him weakly crawl to the shallows and rest. He was too weak to climb on to the bank.

She swore harshly she would kill the son of the bitch with her bare hands. Make him pay for killing her baby. Then she saw him crawling again. Once again, she swore savagely.

Unexpectedly, the waters behind Gerald seemed to boil. A huge jaw soared out from under it. The mosasaur maddened with pain grabbed the half dying man shaking him violently.

Above, Cathy began to sob in relief as Jerkins piloted the Y-36 towards the camp.

The Nbokele camp was aghast with the news of Bubu and Gerald’s death. It hit Louis the worst; this was his second son’s death. He stood with unspeakable shock and turned around, beginning to totter to his hut. But, not before giving Cathy a look of disgust. He clearly blamed her for his son’s death.

The Bkangalasis mourned the night long for the deaths with loud wailing and chanting.

That night, Cathy, Jerkins and the other NIBSians huddled together. The wailing had spooked the daylights out of them. Besides, there was no saying what these grief-stricken tribesmen were capable of. They would have to move the beast out…soon. It was decided to have the second test run within a short time.

Louis took two whole days to overcome the shock. He then plotted vengeance against Cathy and her beast. He swore he would destroy her curtain of secrecy and expose the beast to the media world. The next day, he planned to visit the city and meet a few friends.

A few days later, the second test run was fixed. The NIBSians did all the things right and loaded the reptile into the Y-36. As soon as it was airborne, Louis began radioing his friends in the city.

An hour or two later, Louis was waiting with his reporter friends who would take the news around the world. CNN, BBC, and PTI all the top television channels would follow like hounds on a blood trail. There would be no peace and place for Cathy to hide her behemoth. The plan pleased Louis immensely.

For nearly five hours, the Y-36 did not return, Louis panicked. The reporters grew impatient. As they were ready to leave, Cathy’s voice came over the radio. She informed them they were experiencing trouble with the rebels and the army. Sudden border uprising and skirmishes were common in this part of Africa.

Later, they saw the Y-36 far on the horizon, moving towards them like a wasp. It excited Louis. All of a sudden, two gnat-like objects moving incredibly fast zoomed out of the jungle canopy.

It took Louis a few moments to realize they were surface-to-air missiles used to knock out planes from the sky.

The first hit the Y-36, exploding it into a fiery red ball. A moment later, the second hit it, fragmenting whatever was left. Book-size bits of the craft’s wreckage scattered, falling to the earth, trailing behind black smoke.

For a moment Louis watched in disbelief the destruction, and then he smiled. Fate had avenged even better than he had planned. Joef, Gerald and Bubu were avenged.

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The crocodile hatching season began in the rainforest. Chirping sounds emerged from the multiple nests. A snake slithered down the tree towards the nest, poised ready to strike. The young hatchling broke the shell and clumsily tumbled out. Its siblings were quick on their feet and moving towards the river.

This particular one was clumsy on land, and then it saw its predator. In a lightning move, it leaped, its jaws clamped below the snake’s head. Effortlessly, like scissors cutting a silken ribbon.

The snake’s severed head fell to the ground. Any other time it would wait to feed on the prey but not now. This one needed to reach the water to respire, to live. Besides, its feet were not adapted to move on land. It moved with clumsy haste on its paddle like feet in a bid to reach the river.

1. Hell Hole in Kravchuk Dacha - The Devil Within

**7 Friday, October.**

**Sevastopol, Crimea Ukraine.**

Sixty-two-year-old Viktor Aleksandrovich Kravchuk jerked up from his trance with fear. The photo frame suspended on the wall had been slammed violently as if punched. It was still moving erratically by the impact. He knew what the reason was. It wasn’t the breeze or anything else; it was *her. She* was extremely angry.

His sight went to the photo frame. It showed an old sepia photograph of a woman, his *dead aunt*. What stood out in the dull photograph were *her* eyes. They were alarmingly alive and appeared, staring down at him in disdain. Over the years, a perpetual grimace had appeared on *her* face.

He could never say if it had always been there, or was it the old photograph simply browning with time? The eyes always spooked him.

He hastily emerged out of his room in fear. Closing the door tightly behind him, he locked it shut. He always made sure nobody could enter. His muscular body was drenched in sweat and he felt a chill creep into his old bones.

He grabbed a hand towel to dab the sweat and found his hands shaking. The old man was not the one to be spooked easily, but today he was. What he needed now was a strong peg of *vee’skee*—whisky. Quickly he walked to the cabinet, got out the *vee’skee* and poured a stiff one. He hastily downed two stiff ones.

Viktor had just finished a mentally exhausting session of consulting the spirits. The spirit, he believed, belonged to his dead aunt. After all, she had taught him the dark-art while she was alive.

It was traditional to call on your mentor’s soul after death, in the same way she had done when she was alive. It was a common practice in his village of Kutol, near the foothills of the Caucasus Mountains of Abkhazia. Every family had a benevolent spirit, whom they called on in times of need.

These spirits never manifested themselves but communicated through signs and signals—a quick sudden gust of wind, a rattle of a photo frame, footsteps, sudden brightening or dimming of candle flames, at rare times even a giggle… at even rarer times they appeared embodied in a wisp of smoke. Every sign had to be interpreted. Nothing was fixed, but he had learned the dark-art well. He did nothing without consulting her spirit.

Viktor was a post-*perestroika*—businessman where inflation was higher in Ukraine than in any country of the former USSR. So, he consulted the spirits every time he undertook a task, be it property, marriage, betting on a football match or even buying a lottery.

 Viktor knew he was not following the maxim laid down by the spirit worshippers. His mentor had strictly warned him to call on the spirits only in times of need, but he had been calling them more often. Although he was taught, they were benevolent. He did not believe it. Deep within, he knew he was tampering with the unnatural and it was wrong.

When frequently disturbed, *they* could be extremely nasty and ill-tempered. Especially the spirit of his dead aunt. She could be a real *plo’kha*—bad bitch. Though they never manifested themselves physically, their hostility could be felt through intense shoves and pushes. Calming them could mentally wrench one dry like a sponge.

And today was one of those dreadful days. His aunt, the bitch, had been really ill-tempered. The pushes and shoves were near physical. All because she somehow realized he was not going to obey her. She derived some sort of perverse pleasure in hurting him. Viktor simply detested such sessions with her. Most of the times he always soothed and kept her happy, but today's was different. He had planned to disobey her and sensing it; she had decided to punish him. And her hostility erupted, forcing him out of the room in a hurry.

Viktor’s world was going kaput. His life, his business, his family, his love life, all were falling around him like a pack of cards.

His son, Gevorg, was a step away from complete depression. Gevorg’s fiancée, Katy, had dumped him, as he had been diagnosed with testicular cancer and could father no kids. So much for true love!

For some obscure reason, Gevorg believed his father was to be blamed for it. Faulty genes, his son had cited. From that day onwards, he barely spoke a dozen of words to his father.

What? *Faulty genes?* Bullshit! Viktor’s parents had ten children, and they had lived to the ripe age of seventy to eighty odd years.

His brother’s son, Zhukovsky, was plotting revenge against him. As had fraudulently snatched away his father’s business. He even suspected that his nephew had hired hoodlums to kill him.

Two weeks ago, there had been an attack on his life. He remembered the night he was walking from Istorichesky Boulevard to Ushakov Square when it had happened.

The two hoodlums were thick-necked, close-cropped hair, real *desho’vee*—cheap.

They had cornered him on the pretext of robbery. But were definitely not after his valuables. They drew knives ready to skewer him. But he fought them; after all, he was an ex-boxing champ. Even today, he could defeat men half his age in arm wrestling. Before the police could arrive, he sent the hoodlums fleeing.

If that was not enough, his twenty-four-year-old mistress, Liana, was threatening to expose him. She had demanded a share of his property not to do so. And also threatened to tell her brother about their liaison. He was supposed to be some sort of mafia from the rough Gurzuf region.

Her demand for an enormous piece of property in exchange for giving an old man a few hours of pleasure was ridiculous! Any sex-worker would do the job far cheaper. He should have known she was nothing but a low-class hooker!

The only innocent person in his life was his wife, Olga. This sweet thing was unnecessarily caught up in his dirty vortex. The woman was tall and hefty, with a heart to match. Yet trivial issues could make her cry; be it a harsh word, an angry tone, even the soap operas on television. She never understood a joke and took everything at face value. Her village upbringing and lack of proper education were the culprits. But Viktor saw this as an asset; her child-like innocence had attracted him. She was the only sane thing in his life.

But lately his escapades with Liana had somehow reached her ears. Unable to bear the stress, she had taken up to nagging him. It really seemed the spirits had started taking their pound of flesh.

Today he was on his way to complete some important jobs. He was on his way to make all things right. Today, for the first time, he was to disobey his aunt’s spirit. It was a very fearful thought. He was not sure how his dead aunt would react.

First, he was to tell Liana to screw off. She was not getting an inch of his property. Later, he was to confront Zhukovsky, hand over to him the *dacha*-as compensation and end the matter. He was growing old and could not take this crap anymore.

He looked around the room, sipping his *vee’skee*. The thought and the *vee’skee* were soothing his jangled nerves. His wife sat on a chair, her head buried in her arms. She appeared to be sleeping, but he was sure she was whimpering. A half-filled bottle of vodka stood on the table. She had taken up to drinking recently.

Olga was still miffed with him over the argument they had before his sessions with the spirits. The issue was the same. Every time he left the house, she presumed he was off to meet the whore-that was the terminology she used for Liana. No matter what he did, to convince her otherwise was futile. For now, he was in no mood to explain his situation. He knew he had to finish the job with Liana. Besides, the session with the spirits had really unnerved him.

He turned his attention to his son; the portly youth lay on his favorite couch, pretending to read the newspaper. Viktor was sure the rascal was slyly sipping vodka. It was no use confronting him; for he barely spoke two and a half words the whole day. He would start him on therapy soon. He poured himself another stiff peg and pondered on his decisions.

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Zhukovsky lay on the bed smoking, all his thoughts focused on Viktor. He burned with revenge towards his uncle. All he wanted was to crush the man, destroy him. He had already begun with the son Gevorg. A few of Gevorg’s friends were on his payroll. On his instructions, they provided Gevorg with a steady supply of drugs. He had also falsified Gevorg’s medical report. Doctoring the report from simple viral infection to testicular cancer. And the unsuspecting Gevorg had accepted it as a cruel twist of fate, throwing his life to drugs.

With Gevorg taken care of, he had turned his attention to Viktor. First, he hired hoodlums to beat up his uncle, when it failed; he sent Liana to ensnare Viktor. Liana was his business partner in the stripper-bar-club below his apartment.

As he lay in thought, Liana beside him stirred and moved closer. Sleepily, she nuzzled against Zhukovsky’s chest. Absent-mindedly, he ran his fingers through her lustrous blond hair.

His touch instantly awakened Liana. “What is the matter Zhuko, Baby?”

“Nothing…nothing Li.” he muttered, continuing with his train of thoughts.

“Aw shit!” she whispered sleepily. “Thinking of that bastard…Viktor?”

He looked at her coldly. “Till I don’t get revenge, I won’t rest! Viktor duped my father and screwed our livelihood! He caused dad’s death! I will get him, I swear! That’s why I sent you after him; you grab him by his wiener and squeeze it hard! I will squeeze his neck

harder! What will hurt more?”

Liana stayed quiet after this outburst; it was best to do so. He was in one of his dark, pensive moods. Little did she know his thoughts were not against Viktor but her. He plotted to murder Viktor, accuse Liana and her roughneck brother. Besides getting revenge, he also would get her share of the club when she would be convicted.

At that very moment, Liana had similar dark thoughts, too. She was plotting to murder Viktor with her hoodlum brother’s help. Then implicate Zhukovsky. After his arrest, the stripper-bar-club would be hers. Without another word, she arose and fixed a drink for him.

Viktor poured himself another stiff peg, downed it, and got ready to leave. He stood up, swayed slightly. If he did not do it now, he would probably never be able to. With unsteady yet determined steps, he walked past his wife and son.

As he reached the door, he heard his wife call him. It sounded desperate. He quickly slammed the door and hurried out. There was no telling what his aunt’s spirit would do to stop him.

He hurried down the ill-lit passageway, feeling light-headed. It could not be the alcohol; he was strong as an ox. Besides, he had learned to manage his alcohol too well. He had been drinking since the age of twelve. A village brew made from soured grapes, also called *vod’ka*—a crude firewater. The only thing he could think of was his aunt’s spirit. Only she was capable of such mischief.

He reached half-way down the passage and his sights began to blur. His hands trembled. A kind of chill enveloped him. Gripping the marble banister, he steadied himself. He looked around and shouted. “Stay away from me, you bitch!”

He stopped and listened. Trying to hear any footsteps, rattling maybe even a giggle. Everything remained silent except his ragged breathing. “Just don’t try to stop me, bitch! *Ya*—I will not obey you any longer!” He waved his fist in the air.

Again, he stopped and listened. When he heard nothing, he began at a slower pace.

By the time he reached the stairs, he was feeling woozy. He knew it was a mistake taking in so much whisky.

Just as he raised his foot to climb down the stairs, he heard a soft rustle behind him. It instantly alarmed him. The Bitch! Before he could turn, he was assailed by a recognizable scent. Instantly, he experienced a familiar but strong shove at the center of his back.

With a muffled scream, he rolled down the long flight of steps. It continued till his head crashed into the marble floor at the base of the stairs.

He lay there in shock, excruciating pain bursting from his head and neck. From within the numbing pain, he heard a giggle from above. With an effort, he opened his eyes. He found his sight blurred with blood… his senses numbed in terrible pain and shock. He just caught sight of a blurred disembodied figure high up. Speaking was difficult. “See you in hell, bitch!” He mouthed.

 “Seeeee yooo in Hellll…!” A disembodied voice floated from above, answering back.

He lay there numbed in pain, blood gushing from his forehead. Immobility grew in his limbs and body. He was unable to speak or call for help.

He lay there on the cold marble, helpless. The pool of blood around him was spreading. Slowly, darkness settled over his eyes and the pain dulled away. His eyes remained open but unseeing. Within minutes, he was dead.

2. Hell Hole in Kravchuk Dacha - The Challenge

**About a week later**

**13 Thursday, October.**

 “Are you sure you want to do it?” the youth asked his friend Vasily, solemnly.

Vasily pawed the ground lightly with his shoe and looked up. High on the hill was the Byzantine styled St. Vladimir Cathedral, damaged during the World War II.

He did not want to do it, but could not back off. He looked beyond the youth’s shoulder. Some distance away, he could see his group of friends. The guys were dressed in jazzy colored American exercise suits and sports shoes. The girls in tight blouses and miniskirts, dark eyeliner and deep colored lipstick. They were looking expectantly in the duo’s direction. Some showed a hint of amusement, others concern.

Vasily’s eyes sought one of the girls in the group, with scarlet lipstick, her skirt shorter and tighter than the rest. Her expression showed open derision, ready to scorn if he refused. He could never live with that sort of humiliation.

“Do you want to do the dare?” his concerned friend asked him again.

Vasily’s mind shifted from the girl and went back to the dare.

The dare was simple. A week earlier, an elderly man, Viktor Kravchuk, had tumbled down the stairs and died of a broken neck. All that remained of the tragedy was the chalked outline of the corpse on the floor. The white outline drawn by the police investigation team around the corpse to mark its position. The group had visited the site a few days after the accident.

His dare was to place a red rose anywhere within the corpse’s outline. Later on, his ‘challenger’ friends would ascertain if he had completed the dare. If successful, they would give him 5000 *karbovanets* commonly called *kupons* or coupons. It was a temporary currency of Ukraine, approximately $20.

If not, he would have to pay up. But he was not doing it for the treat; he was doing it to impress ‘scarlet lips’. And he knew he had to do it or be *chicken* before her.

But the dare was not as simple as it sounded. The place, Kravchuk Dacha, where this dare had to be played out was a building fraught with stories of eerie and spook. It was rumored that old Viktor dabbled with the art of calling the spirits, and it killed him. He tried not to remember the magazine’s photographs. It showed the old man’s twisted body with his glassy eyes wide open. He shuddered with the recollection.

Once more, he looked at his friends. “Yeah, I’ll do it bro…its cool!” He told his concerned friend.

Waving to his friends, he turned to his destination with trepidation. Once more, his sight searched the skies only to catch sight of Nagormaya Square, dominated by Bondarenko’s 65-foot-high statue of Lenin.

A warm breeze blew, bringing with it the fragrance of native Crimean pines. It should have really been a chilly winter wind. But for the 90 miles long Crimean Mountains, it stretched along the coastline, providing shelter from the north winds. So, Sevastopol enjoyed a Mediterranean climate. Reluctantly, he began walking towards his destination.

Kravchuk Dacha was situated in a quiet part of the port-city. An area adorned with trees of cedars, cypresses and sequoias. So secluded was the location that traffic was seldom seen on the road adjoining it. It was once a dacha. It meant a country place or a mansion with a garden in Russian dialect. But the Kravchuk Dacha was no longer so, it had been converted into a three-storey building.

Though now it was in a state of neglect, it still reflected its years’ old grandeur. Over the decades, privileged Russians like Tsars and aristocrats visited the dacha for relaxation.

Vasily and his group of ‘challenger’ friends had seen it inside out. Something about the building always spooked him and his friends. Their inherent fear for the building had begun years ago.

During their school days, they would go to meet Gevorg, in that building. He was one of the privileged children who could afford toys, so most of the children would visit him.

None of them would venture in alone; they always went in a group. If any reached early, they waited for another to arrive before entering. It had then become a ritual to wait for each other.

As he neared the building, he slowed his steps. The old memories came back to haunt him. He wished he had not accepted the dare. But it was too late to back away now.

He reached the gate and boldly walked in. Nobody would stop him; as usual, the Turkish watchman Mustafa was not at his post. The old man would be gossiping with the men from the garage on the ground floor.

Vasily walked slowly from the gate to the building’s entrance. He tried to block the thoughts and images flooding his brain. Once inside the building, he stopped to renew his courage. The interior felt cold, as if stepping into an air-condition room. It was also in a state of semi-gloom. A few bulbs lit the long corridor.

He looked up at the long flight of stairs. Its rich marble still stood out, even though years of use had worn it down. He stepped closer and looked tentatively up. The stairs continued upward, zigzagging high to the third floor. It appeared like a pathway to hell, only this shot upwards. Luckily, he had to climb only to the second floor.

He looked around before he could ascend it. No one stalking, no shadows…nothing, he was alone. He felt silly; it was nothing, just a quick burst to the second floor was required. Taking a deep breath, he prepared himself.

As he touched the banister, it felt cold. Ignoring it, he began upstairs in a rush. His footsteps pounding on the marble stairs were loud enough to awake the dead. He reached the first-floor landing and stopped.

Once more he looked around; his wild intrusion had awoken no one. From now on, he would move slowly to the site. He did not want to desecrate the dead.

Silently, he made his way towards the next flight of stairs. Now he was aware of the growing cold. Aware of the absence of the natural light, the only light available was the dim electric bulbs high in the ceiling. But he put all thoughts behind and continued.

Before he could realize he saw it…at least the foot…of the outline. Yet he bravely walked on till the entire outline was before him. The chalk powder used on the outline appeared fresh but discolored. Somebody had put a few metal oil lamps near it. All were unlit.

Something seemed strange about them. These appeared to be artifacts, real ancient ones. Judging by their peculiar shape, they seemed to be of Austrian or Yugoslavian origin, something to do with East European gypsy culture. An even similar but strange oviform metallic pot stood some distance away. Etched on it were queer figures, somewhat similar to those on tarot cards.

The sight of these queer things unnerved him. It was like stepping into a mausoleum. He tried not to think of anything as he prepared to place the rose on the outline. As he bent down, a monstrous shadow fell across him. He froze on the spot.

“*Kharasho’… Kharasho’*—good,” a voice boomed. “I am glad you have come to pay your respects. But trust me, he is not dead…his spirit still lives here…”

The words unfroze him; he dropped the rose and looked up. The sight frosted his blood.

Towering above him was a huge, tall gowned figure. Its face was illuminated with an unholy glow. In the light of the glow, he saw the figure had a large white face with a scraggly bush of dark fur encircling it.

It was the ugliest thing he had ever witnessed in his life. He fled.

Olga stood in bewilderment as she watched the youth fleeing. “Listen…son wait a moment!” she called after him. *Why did he run away?* She wondered. She meant him no harm.

“Son…” she called again.

When he ignored her call, she continued down the stairs, balancing the lighted candle and her long gown. She had come down to perform a ritual, a ritual meant to lock her husband’s soul on the earth. It became habitual for her to do so every evening. And was to be performed at the place the deceased had last used. What better place than where her husband breathed his last!

So, she chose the spot.

Gathering up her gown, she squatted beside the lamps. Lighting them with the special candle she held. The lamps were of ancient origin, supposed to awaken the spirit. Once done, she muttered incantations meant to invoke the spirit.

The last rite was the most important one. She reached for the oviform metallic pot and dipped her hand in the whitish powder inside it. She sprinkled it all along the outline. It was a concoction of special ground herbs. This was the ultimate trap for the dead person’s spirit.

An old friend, Anna, had taught her the ritual. Also, teaching her the incantations and lending her the lamps and the concoction.

Her friend had assured Olga that this was the only way she could get back her dead husband. First, trap his soul…then get him back physically!

As she stood up, the oviform pot beside her tipped over. She watched, aghast, as the concoction scattered wildly on the outline. It infuriated her. How could she be so careless? *It never dawned to her how a vessel with no physical contact could tip over!*

3. Hell Hole in Kravchuk Dacha - The Shady Deal

**16 Sunday, October.**

Gevorg feigned to be sick and asleep. He patiently waited for his mother to go to the market. As soon as he heard the door slam shut, he was up. Grabbing his cell phone, he dialed a number. “Hey Karim!” he yelled, “Get here man as soon as possible. I need a drink and smoke real bad!”

 Karim sprang up when he heard Gevorg’s voice. “Yes man!” he answered in an overjoyed tone. “I will be there as quick as possible with your stuff!”

Putting down the cell phone, he looked at his friend Nuri. “Guess who?”

“Gevorg?” Nuri answered

.

“Yeah and he wants some stuff!”

“Let’s go and get it then!”

“Do you know where we have to go?”

“We have to go to …sir…Right?” Nuri’s face was pale as he spoke. Anything to do with Gevorg had to be told to Sir immediately. Meeting Sir was an unpleasant task. They did it because it paid well them and also got free drinks and smokes.

Karim picked up his cell phone and called on a number. After listening and answering submissively, he put it down.

“What?” asked his friend.

“Let’s hurry,” Karim urged. Getting on their bicycles, they headed to the sea-front.

Soon they were on a strip of land-a tourist haven. It housed various stores like liquor, pornography and Russian artifacts, also tattoo joints, body piercing joints… even a few gambling clubs.

The duo hurried into one of the clubs. The bouncer outside looked sullenly at them. Recognizing them, he offered a small nod. They pulled aside a heavy curtain of stringed beads and entered.

Inside, the lights were dim, customers occupied booths, either drinking or talking to scantily dressed hookers. A Ukrainian native song played on a low volume.

As they hurried towards the bar, a husky voice called them. “Hi cutie pigeons, want the two of you to take me for a price of one?”

They looked up to see a short, muscular figure dressed in tight hot pants and a blouse with a plunging neckline. But the broad-lined face confirmed the caller was neither a man nor a woman.

Just then, a deep voice boomed. “Boris, stop harassing the boys!”

The thing called Boris instantly backed off. “Yes boss…yes boss.”

The deep voice belonged to Sir. He stood there in a black suit, ruddy and broad face with a huge auburn mustache. His long hair was tied tightly behind in a ponytail. He reminded them of those junkie rock stars, but for his well-exercised body. He beckoned them towards the bar.

There he handed them a wallet size plastic box filled with powder. “This is high grade stuff. Make sure Gevorg gets all of it. Don’t you try it; this can blow your brains out!” Then he handed them a wad of 2000 *karbovanets*. “This is for your services and drinks. Enjoy yourself boys!”

“Thank you, Sir Zhukovsky!” the boys answered in unison.

Zhukovsky watched the boys leave the club, contented with the day’s happenings.

Olga returned to find Gevorg completely stoned. Anger arose in her. It had to be his two good-for-nothing friends, Karim and Nuri. No matter what she did, the two always sneaked in drugs for her Gevorg. She would have to do something about them. Quickly, she went to call Mustafa. No visitors would be allowed to meet Gevorg from now on.

**Two months later.**

**5 Monday, December.**

Olga was rudely awoken to loud insistent ringing of the doorbell. She grabbed her nightgown and hurried.

It was the building watchman, Mustafa. “Hurry Madame!” he urged. “Gevorg! He is lying on the pavement!”

She cried. “Mustafa, let's hurry. I hope he is not hurt!”

A short distance from the building, Gevorg lay under a tree in an inebriated state. His mobile, wristwatch, wallet, shoes, even his glasses, were missing.

“O my God!” she cried in shock, cupping her mouth with her palm.

A small crowd of early morning joggers had gathered around the fallen youth. Before Mustafa could stop her, she bent down to lift her son in her arms like a baby. Then the others moved to help her. All the way she kept cooing sweetly in his ears, encouraging him.

Everyone could see he was wasted. The once portly youth barely weighed thirty to forty kilograms. Drugs and liquor had consumed his body.

Once in the house, she wrapped him up in bedspreads and made him comfortable. It mildly revived him, pleasing her.

“Gevorg!” she called. “Wake up! I will make you your favorite baked fish.”

He mumbled feebly.

“No…no son! No protesting! C’mon have a bath before our meal!”

 This time, it was more of a grunt from him as he fell asleep.

**9 Friday, December.**

Olga sat on her son’s bedside, rubbing his palms. They felt cold. “Have some hot soup, son!” she urged. “You’ll feel good.”

When he did not respond, she said, “Gevorg! You are going to have your soup whether or not you like it. You are too much of a fussy-pot.” With that, she headed to the kitchen.

On the way, she snatched up her mobile. Furiously, she dialed a number. Within two rings, it was answered. “Anna…Anna!”She hissed in the cell. “Where is Farzana? Is she back?”

Farzana was the woman supposed to know the technique of bringing back the dead.

Anna answered calmly. “No Olga dear, she is not back. Why are you so impatient?”

“Anna, you know I am going crazy without him!” She was on the verge of tears. “I need him fast! I want him fast!” Then she broke down inconsolably.

Just as she was about to heat the soup, she remembered something. Viktor’s most precious wealth! She had to protect it! She could not leave it lying around. *What if that brute Zhukovsky found it? What would Viktor say when he returned?*

She tried to think of a place to hide it. *The loft? The cupboard? Under the bed… where?* Then it came to her, the refrigerator! Zhukovsky would never think of searching there. Once decided, she set on the cumbersome task.

Half an hour later, she finished wrapping it in a plastic sheet. She emptied the lower half of the refrigerator and hauled it in. Then she tried her best to cover it with groceries. Later, she was back to heating the soup.

**11 Sunday, December.**

The delightful barks of stray dogs told the Mustafa that the woman from the third floor, Mrs. Olga Kravchuk, had arrived. She always fed them biscuits and chopped duck’s feet. They were responding promptly to her calls. She had named every single one of them.

He hurried to the gate and was right; the tall Mrs. Kravchuk was feeding the dogs. She had cut her hair short that looked a bit comical.

When she saw the watchman, she hurried to him. He knew what questions to expect, just two.

“Did my Gevorg leave the building?” she asked.

He chuckled. He had not seen her son for a week.

“Did any of his junkie friends visit him?” she asked him again.

“No Madame…” he answered. The poor mother worried a lot about her son. Her boy was sick and had lost a good amount of weight. Some also said he was dying. But his junkie friends would not leave him alone. They kept supplying him drugs.

Pleased with the answer, she scratched inside her big purse and palmed him a hundred kupons. As she did so, he spied a couple of vodka bottles in her bag.

Sensing it, she smiled at him sheepishly, “For my Gevorg…so he doesn’t go out with his junkie friends…From that day, I made him swear he would never go out. Whatever he wanted I would get for him…Ah Mustafa, remember to collect some baked fish from me later.”

Without another word, the woman trudged towards the building. The old watchman felt pity for her. She was a good woman, but tragedy kept dogging her. First, her husband’s death, then her son’s drugs and drinking problem. For sixteen years he had been working for the Kravchuks’ and had seen it all.

Olga barely reached the first floor when she felt winded. Perspiration was running down her neck and back. But she heaved her heavy load and continued. She did not want to leave her son alone for too long.

Trudging on, she reached the second floor, near the spot her husband had died and stopped. She gazed forlornly at the spot. The lamps stood unlit. The powder on the outline was in disarray. She had neglected the ritual for a few days, really, more than a week. Lack of interest was not the case; Anna had informed her that Farzana would not be back for some time.

*The only thing she wanted was to get him back!* The thought spurred her. She ignored the tiredness and hurried up the stairs to her flat. She reached the door and got out her bunch of keys.

 The door had three self-locks on the outside and two draw bolts inside. She never really understood why Viktor had insisted on so much security. The door was of solid timber that would need a battering-ram to break it open. *Did he mean to keep something out or in?* But nevertheless, even after his death, she religiously kept the locks and the draw-bolts.

For now, she did not want to dwell on it. She silently put down her heavy load, careful not to make a sound. Then she hurried to her son’s bedroom and peeped in. She was satisfied to see the cocoon of bedspreads undisturbed. And could experience the cold her boy was feeling the whole time through.

Then her eyes darted to the refrigerator. She hoped he had not rummaged through it. She got out another key and opened the refrigerator and looked in, she felt relief. “Gevorg…son!” she called.

“Wake up! I will make you your favorite *lasasee’ny*—salmon dish.” She rummaged inside the refrigerator for some frozen fish.

She knew he would be mumbling.

“No…no son! No protesting! Then you and I can have a drink of vodka before our meal!”

This time, she was sure it was a grunt from him.

When she got out the fish and locked it up, tears glistened in her eyes. Vodka was bad for him. He could barely swallow a peg. But it was the only thing that interested him.

As she walked to the kitchen, she passed her husband’s photo frame. She stopped before it. Only one burning thought ran through her mind. *I want him back!*

On entering the kitchen, she heard a loud rattling sound. Startled, she hurried back. Viktor’s suspended photo frame was quivering. She looked around; until she spied a ajar window, damn breeze…she muttered and hurried to shut it.

4. Hell Hole in Kravchuk Dacha - The Threat

**12 Monday, December.**

The doorbell rang, and Olga hurried to open the door. It was the cleaning maid, Nikita; she came thrice a week to clean up. She was a young, pretty girl. The first thing she noticed was her mistress’ extremely short, bad haircut. All her huge, lovely curls were gone.

“Good morning, Auntie” she greeted. Everyone younger called Olga, auntie. “Your hair, auntie?”

“Oh…oh nothing Nikita just a simple haircut. My husband always wanted it.”

Nikita looked at her quizzically. When she got no explanation, she found the broom and began sweeping.

Today there was an urgency in her work. Quickly she finished and went into Gevorg’s room. She had been away from town and heard that he was unwell. She was eager to see him. The two had had a few sexual escapades in the past. They had visited Simferopol, a small town on the banks of the river Salgir and the picturesque port of Odessa. He always was caring and paid well for the sexual favors. His parents knew nothing about it.

But what she saw on entering appalled her. Covered from head to toe, a mummy-like figure occupied the bed, snoring loudly. There was a strong smell of urine, alcohol, and cigarette smoke. At the edge of his bed, on the floor, was a puddle of urine.

Nikita hurried towards the bed to say a ‘hi’. But a loud, cold voice froze her steps. “Nikita!” It was Olga. “Gevorg has just fallen asleep from sheer exhaustion. Don’t you dare disturb him. Do you also supply him drugs on a quiet? I hope not…Hurry up and finish the work! We are to have guests!”

Nikita remained mum, worked hastily, and left.

After Nikita left, Olga looked around the room. The next act was to begin. She was making sure everything was in place. That bastard Zhukovsky was to visit them. Something about signing the property papers he had mentioned over the phone. But she could not trust him; his motive could really be to harm Gevorg or worse, take him away. A thought she could not bear.

Minutes later Zhukovsky arrived, a brute of a man. Towering over her nearly by a head and half a shoulder, he always reminded her of a Viking warrior.

“Good morning, Olga.” he greeted her sourly.

“Good morning, Zhukovsky.” she answered back cordially. They had always been on a first name basis.

A moment of unpleasant silence drifted.

“Olga...uh.” he cleared his throat. A smell of expensive cigarettes and perfume emanated from him.

 “Oh…Come in.” She invited rather reluctantly. She gripped her mobile tightly, ready to use it at the first sign of hostility.

Seating himself, he looked around the place. “Where is Gevorg, Olga?” he demanded.

The question caused a knee-jerk reaction in her. “Why...Why do you want him?”

 “I just want him to sign a few papers.” He looked sharply at her.

“He’s unwell. Whatever it is, I can sign, then you can leave!” Immediately she regretted being so brusque. She saw his face tighten.

“I really do not know Olga…” he began angrily.

Just then, they heard Gevorg’s voice from the bedroom. “Ma…ma, who is it?”

 “Zhukovsky, son, he wants you to sign some papers.”

“Tell him I am unwell. I will do it sometime later.”

Olga turned to Zhukovsky. He looked mad; he had heard it too.

“Olga, could I at least speak to him?” he asked in a dry voice.

“You heard the boy. He is unwell and does not want to speak to you!” she answered firmly.

Zhukovsky stood up, his whole six-plus-frame standing in an intimidating posture. “Olga, this is not over!” He threatened. “The next time I come, you better have your junkie son ready to sign the papers or I will send him…” He jerked his thumb upwards. “To his bastard father!” Smiling cruelly, he let himself out of the door.

As he left, Olga hurriedly locked the door and drew all the bolts. For the first time, she was thankful for the locks. Once done, she felt her knees tremble, with difficulty hobbled to a chair and seated herself.

Some minutes later, she was dialing her friend Anna.

**Later that night…**

Olga was awoken by a sound. It seemed like footsteps… Her first thought was Zhukovsky! Somehow, he had managed to get in. It filled her with fear. She lay still, trying to pinpoint the presence of the intruder.

With extreme care, she raised herself on her elbows and looked around. The inert form of Gevorg was visible on his bed. It could not be him; he was too weak even to go to the toilet.

Once again there was a sound, this time it was from the kitchen, the sound of vessels. Olga’s heart leaped with joy. *It had to be Viktor! He had returned back! He was the only one to get up for a midnight snack!*

She sat up eagerly, then stopped. Did he plan to surprise her? She felt she shouldn’t go in and spoil his surprise. She waited.

Again, there was a sound, this time a lot louder. She could not contain her excitement any more. “Viktor…” she called softly, not wanting to awake Gevorg. “Viktor.” She called again; her voice echoed hollowly in the dark.

Once more, she called. “Viktor darling, are you there?” When only silence greeted her, she arose and went towards the kitchen. She could no longer bear the suspense.

“Viktor.” she called aloud and entered. The kitchen was in a state of semi-gloom. She tried to penetrate the darkness with her sight. Unable, she switched on the light.

The place stood in utter desolation. Only Viktor’s frame was askew. She straightened it and stood there. She knew *Viktor* was around. She left the light on and began a long wait for him.

**Wednesday, 14 December.**

The telephone rang and Olga hurried to answer it. It was Anna, and she sounded excited. “Olga darling, I have good and bad news for you! Farzana will be back in a day or two!”

Olga heard her pause on the other side and take a long breath before continuing. “But she needs one last thing…an item from you. She needs a container…”

“A container?” asked Olga.

“Something to collect his soul in…”

“What Farzana means is a container—a corpse…a dead body…” explained Anna.

A startled cry escaped Olga’s lips. “That is impossible Anna! Could not she think of something else?”

“I will see what I can do! Don’t you worry Olga.”She cut the line.

Olga sat pensively, not knowing what to do.

The ring of the doorbell disturbed her. Wearily, she arose and walked towards the door. Anna’s demand was impossible. *From where the hell would she get a corpse?*

She opened the door. It was Nikita. Letting the cleaning girl in, she went back to her thoughts. Then a brilliant idea struck her.

Nikita worked, but her mind was working furiously. Something was terribly wrong with Gevorg. She could not wait to check him out. Moving quickly, she began her job, one eye on the pensive mother.

Halfway through her job, she saw Olga arise and enter the kitchen. This was her chance. She hurried into his room. A snoring sound was audible. A few cigarette butts lay scattered on the floor. The room smelled of stale cigarette smoke and alcohol.

Nikita hurried to his bedside. Every part of the body was covered except his hair. She pulled the cover slightly and gasped at the sight.

*Instead of Gevorg’s head was a medium-sized clay pot! Crudely stuck on it was plenty of human hair.* A cell phone lay beside, blinking and emitting a soft snoring sound.

She screamed with fear and backed away. Before she could realize, a shadow loomed over her. She felt a painful blow at the back of her head and fell unconscious.

Olga stood over the limp body. She held a heavy bloodstained skillet in her hand. “Curiosity killed the bitch!” , she muttered.

Then she went to the refrigerator and opened its door.

*Inside was Viktor’s well-earned wealth… Gevorg-his corpse, actually!* It sat there; its knees pulled up close to the chest. Huddled and small, structured, akin to an Aztec mummy. It sat at the bottom of the refrigerator, wrapped in a transparent plastic sheet. Frost had covered most of the plastic, his hair and spectacles. Fresh vegetables lay around it.

Looking at the corpse, Olga said, “See Gevorg, I needed a *vessel* and God has provided me one. I hope you don’t mind your father being in a *woman’s* body.” Jerking her thumb towards the limp form of Nikita on the ground. She bent over and wiped the frost off his glasses. “As soon as Farzana resurrects your father’s soul, I will retrieve yours, too. Then we can all live happily ever after.”

Reaching for a bundle that rested near its feet, she said, “Do you want me to make you your favorite baked *oo’tkoo-kar’ho’shka*—duck-potato dish?”

The ringing of the doorbell caused her to twitch. It was unexpected. *Who could it be?* She wasn’t expecting anyone. Maybe it was Mustafa, come to take the leftovers.

But when the doorbell rang incessantly, she panicked. It wasn’t Mustafa, it was trouble. Hurriedly, she banged the refrigerator door shut.

The doorbell continued to ring. She hastily covered the dummy, masquerading as Gevorg, on the bed. The bell sounded louder and shriller. She wished it would stop.

Rushing to the door, she remembered Nikita. The girl was still lying on the ground where she had left her. She returned back, the doorbell resounding like an irritant in her ear.

Grabbing the girl by her arms, she dragged her across the floor into the kitchen. Breathlessly, she ran to open the door. Sliding opened the safety-chain door a little and gasped.

The tall figure of Zhukovsky stood outside. “Olga!” he ordered. “Open the door!”

“Leave Gevorg alone, please Zhukovsky, he is not well!” she pleaded.

“Just a simple signature damnit! And you will never see me!”

“Not today, Zhukovsky. Leave him alone just for a few days!”

“Olga! If you don’t let me in, I will get the police and come. They will break down the door and arrest you and your stupid son,” he warned.

Olga grew silent

Outside Zhukovsky realized he had scored a point. He waited expectantly. Some moments later, he heard the safety-chain slid open.

“Come in Zhukovsky.” she said stoically. “Gevorg is in the bedroom.” She let him into the bedroom and hurried to the kitchen.

Zhukovsky wrinkled his nose at the odor of alcohol and stale cigarette smoke. He kneeled beside the sleeping form and whispered. “Gevorg…Gevorg wake up.”

There was an unfamiliar odor now. It smelt like urine. Behind him he could hear Olga’s footsteps, it stopped near him. Once again, he tried. He grasped what seemed Gevorg’ shoulder and shook it. It felt abnormal, as if a cushion was underneath…Something was very wrong!

He turned to Olga and was in time to see her swing something at him. As much as he tried to avoid, but it slammed into the side of his face. He felt a jolt of pain stun him.

Before he could recover, he felt another hit slam in his face. Then another…then blackness.

5. Hell Hole in Kravchuk Dacha - The Human Vessel

Zhukovsky woke up groggy. His head ached worse than any hangover he had ever experienced. The pain had dulled his senses. Somebody was talking to him, but the voice sounded disembodied. He tried hard to concentrate on the voice.

Cold water splashed on his face, dulling the pain slightly and easing his senses. He focused on the surroundings. It appeared strange. Then he focused on the figure before him. Slowly it grew distinct. Olga!

Then it all came to him. She had attacked him with something…thrice. Anger filled him. He tried to arise but was unable. His hands and legs were tied to the chair. A duct tape was plastered across his mouth. Rage welled in him. He tried to rip the bonds, but the nylon rope bit into his wrist. Besides, the chair he was tied to was of solid timber. Escape appeared difficult for the moment.

Olga strode in front of him. “Ahh…you are awake!”

She had a strange look and held a large kitchen knife in her hand. Walking to the refrigerator, she opened the door. “Gevorg, I have got you a real man-daddy! You will not have to be embarrassed with the girl-daddy.”

Zhukovsky stretched slightly and the sight inside the refrigerator made his stomach roll. One thought raced through his mind. *Olga had gone totally psycho! Had she murdered her son and put his corpse in the fridge…for what?*

Seeing Zhukovsky’s repugnance, she instantly cried in anguish, “No…no it’s not what you are thinking! I did not kill Gevorg! The pain, the liquor, the drugs killed him! He died in my arms! My poor boy!”

Slowly, a change appeared in her demeanor. She smiled coyly and opened the door a bit wider. “See Viktor,” she addressed Zhukovsky. “I have taken good care of your son.”

Zhukovsky was surprised to be addressed as *Viktor*. Had the bereaved woman lost her marbles?

Then he saw her smile bashfully. “I know you are not Viktor, as yet Zhukovsky, but when I put his soul in you…you will become him!”

Zhukovsky tried to rip the cord in rage, violently quivering the chair.

“Don’t be angry Zhukovsky. Let me explain. Besides, I am going to kill you now and put my Viktor’s soul in you.” She laughed unexpectedly, running her finger on the edge of the knife.

For the first time, Zhukovsky felt the wisps of fear creep in him.

“Actually, it is not me; it is Anna who is to do it. You know Anna, don’t you? That sweet old thing… She lives right in your neighborhood.”

Of course, he knew Anna! She was a senile old spinster who did quirky things. Like throwing feces on cars parked too close to her house. Nobody in their right mind took her seriously.

“Anna has promised me...” Olga continued, “to do so when her sister Farzana returns from her trip.”

Zhukovsky groaned inwardly. Farzana had died less than a week after Viktor. Yet Anna went about speaking as if she was alive. He now felt pity for Olga as well as fear. This woman needed urgent help. He began straining at the cords of his hands. If only she had not duct taped his mouth!

“Anna said today that she needed a corpse to put Viktor’s soul…” She sounded breathless.“Let me explain to you. On the day of Victor’s funeral, unable to bear my grief, she promised to get my Viktor back. But before that could happen, Gevorg died. I think it was Friday, 9th of this month, Dec.”

Zhukovsky tried signaling her to remove the tape, but she went into a bout of recollection and continued. “I knew I could not lose him, too. If I could get back Viktor, surely, I could get back my Gevorg. It meant preserving his body in the refrigerator. At least he would have his own body instead of somebody’s corpse.”

She smiled contentedly, pleased with herself. “Since then, I did a lot to show the world that Gevorg was alive. I created a dummy of him…putting my own hair for it so that it looked real. I even fooled you and Nikita with that fake snoring and talking. Recorded it on the cell and played it as a ringtone whenever either of you was around.” She stopped to laugh jubilantly.

Once again, she looked at Zhukovsky and sighed. “But then you came along and threatened police action and see what you have got into…Before you go, I want you to know something…”

She moved closer to Zhukovsky. He cringed. She reeked of vodka. All the while he had been unconscious, she had been drinking.

Her eyes were on him, but she appeared not to be seeing him. They appeared glazed. “Viktor, I have something to confess. I am really sorry for killing you. It was I who pushed you down the stairs. On that day, I believed you were leaving me for that bitch Liana, and I could not bear it. I was jealous, drunk…and furious. I could not control my anger…” She was on the verge of tears. “It was only later I came to know about the will and I regretted. So, I began striving to get you back…” With that, she broke down.

The happenings on that fateful day were coming back to her…

*She remembered calling out to Viktor, desperately. But he quickly slammed the door and hurried out. She continued to sob for a few moments. Suddenly, anger burst in her. She swore angrily under her breath. He could not just walk out on her. She had given the best years of her life to him, and now he was leaving her. He had not even cared for their ailing son. All he cared for was that whore, Liana. All these thoughts had made her furious. If she could not get him, nobody else would! She stood up with murder in her heart and began walking to the door.*

*Opening the door to a slit, she peeped out. Viktor was gripping the passage walls, steadying himself. He looked around and shouted at something unseen. “Stay away from me, you bitch!”*

*Then he stopped and listened. Olga too watched silently, not knowing what to do but sure of her aim. Once again, he was shouting at something unseen. “Just don’t try to stop me bitch! I will not obey you any longer!” waving his fist in the air.*

*Again, he was listening. Then he began at a slower pace.*

*Silently, Olga slipped out and cautiously followed Viktor. As he reached the top of the stairs, she could see he was feeling woozy. A plan had formed in her mind. She quickly slipped towards him. But all that vodka had made her clumsy.*

*Just as he raised his foot to climb down the stairs, he heard her… a soft rustle behind him. It instantly alarmed him.*

*Before he could turn around, she rammed him with her shoulder in the center of his back.With a muffled scream, he rolled down the long flight of steps. It continued till his head crashed into the marble floor at the base of the stairs.*

*She could see him lay there in shock. A kind of exhilaration hit her, and she could not help giggling. With an effort, he opened his eyes. His sight was blurred in blood. He just caught sight of her. He was trying to speak, but found it difficult. “See you in hell, bitch!” He mouthed.*

*“See you in Hell! Bastard!” she answered from above to him.*

*Leaving him there lying in pain, blood gushing from his forehead, she strutted back to the room…*

Olga appeared to be in a daze. The fear in Zhukovsky had multiplied several times. Especially after hearing the killing of her husband. This woman had indeed gone crazy; He tried harder to break the bands, but only dug deeper in his wrists. Also causing the chair to tremble slightly, he immediately regretted it.

The sound alerted her; she looked up sternly at Zhukovsky. She held the kitchen knife, now even more purposefully, making Zhukovsky struggle harder. Now it did not matter if she heard it or not. She moved towards him; her eyes expressionless. It made him began to struggle even more violently.

Then, just behind Olga, he saw a small figure. The young girl, Nikita. In her hand, she held a heavy skillet, the same Olga had used to hit him. The girl put a finger to her lips, signaling him to keep silent. Slowly, she tip-toed towards Olga.

The woman must have seen it in his eyes, for she started to turn behind. Nikita swung the skillet, slamming it on the side of the woman’s face.

The blow caused Olga to stagger a bit. Zhukovsky could see it had only managed to stun the woman. Holding her bleeding head with one hand, she gripped the knife tightly with the other. A crazy look crossed the woman’s face, one of glee and pain. It looked dangerous. Almost mechanically, she began turning to her attacker.

The girl behind her appeared confused and afraid, unsure of what to do next.

“Hit her girl, hit her…Hit her again!” Zhukovsky urged silently but urgently.

Almost obeying Zhukovsky’s silent urging, the girl swung the skillet like a badminton racquet. It caught the woman square in the face. The woman staggered drunkenly backwards.

Screaming insanely, Nikita swung the skillet, hitting Olga again and again till she dropped the knife and fell to the ground in a heap.

Only then she stopped screaming and hitting the woman. She stared wildly at the inert bloody form, gritting her teeth angrily.

Zhukovsky rattled the chair violently, breaking her stare. He signaled with his eyes towards the knife. It lay close to the fallen woman.

Now all anger disappeared from the girl to be replaced by fear.

“Get the knife, girl!” he screamed from behind his duct taped mouth. The girl moved closer, warily as if nearing a reptile. Keeping an eye on the woman, she hesitantly bent down and quickly grabbed the knife. Roughly, she ripped the tape from his mouth and cut his bonds.

As he stood up, Olga moaned. Stretching out her hand, she grasped Zhukovsky’s ankle. He made a fist ready to punch, but stopped. Her face was bruised, a trickle of blood oozed from her head.

“Please…please Zhukovsky please…don’t take my son away…” she begged.

Zhukovsky leaned closer to the distress woman, trying to avoid the blood. “Even I have a confession to make, Olga…”

“Come on…Hurry up!” Nikita called urgently.

“Go girl, I will join you.” Zhukovsky ordered.

“What is it?” Nikita asked. “Come, she is crazy!”

“Stupid bitch! Did not I tell you to get out?” he snapped.

Nikita shrugged her shoulders and ran out, eager to get away from this madhouse. Zhukovsky once again turned his attention to Olga. She was still begging, grasping his ankle. “Please don’t take my Gevorg away… Zhukovsky…Please Zhukovsky…”

“Like as I was saying. Olga, I have a confession to make…” Zhukovsky sneered in her face.

 “Vicktor never fell for Liana. I set her up to trap him. Good, you killed Viktor; I can take his property…besides you will be arrested for the murder of Viktor…”

Olga’s pleading eyes were now filled with pain.

Ruthlessly Zhukovsky continued. “Gevorg never suffered from cancer, Olga…I had his medical report changed…!”

“No…no…” she cried in disbelief.

“*No, no* Olga, there is more…don’t start crying!” he appealed mockingly.

She looked at him helplessly, oblivious to the pain or blood.

Zhukovsky looked intently at her. “I kept supplying Gevorg with lethal drugs through Karim and Nuri so it could kill him…The drugs were supposed to kill him within two months. When it did not, I came here to check out under the pretext of signing some papers. But your clever trick fooled me until today. But thanks to you, everything is okay.”

He could see her swooning, probably from the loss of blood. Wresting his ankle from her grip, he kicked her hand and walked to the door.

Behind him he heard her weak voice “Zhukovsky whatever has happened does not matter. Please don’t let the police take my Gevorg away… Please Zhukovsky…”

“He is dead. You are going to jail! Who will look after his stinking corpse? Not me. I will feed it to the dogs. Everything is over!” He looked at her, she appeared defeated.

 Just as he closed the door, he heard a loud wail of despair and grief. He smiled at himself contentedly, smoothing his shirt and trousers before continuing. He had to hurry and inform the police, then reclaim the property. Never had he dreamed it would be so easy to get back his property. He began whistling as he walked down the corridor towards the stairs. Brushing lightly his fingers on the leaves of the metallic potted plant that lined the passageway.

Just as he was about to descend the stairs, he heard a low rumble behind him. Within seconds, the sound rose to a deafening banshee-like cry. He felt something barrel into his back with a force of a battering ram. Caught by surprise, he doddered for a moment, and then lost his footing, rolling down the flight of stairs.

He slammed his head hard on the marble floor below. For a moment, it knocked the wind out of him. Shit! He swore angrily. *Olga is trying to kill me!* He looked up the flight of stairs; she was nowhere to be seen. “Hiding huh, bitch,” he called.

When it was received with silence, he taunted, “I am not Viktor to die with one push. I am still going to the police.” He tried to sit up, but felt a jolt of pain in his knee. It had to be a sprain, no broken bone. He eased himself on his good leg while he called again. “Olga, do you know what they do to an unclaimed corpse?” he jeered. “They slash and hack up the body and do all sorts of experiments on it. Then finally the organs are cut haggis-like…”

He stopped abruptly; a low but heavy grating sound filled the silent air.

Zhukovsky watched in utter fear as a heavy metallic pot moved, appearing at the top of the stairs. In frozen fear, he saw the pot slowly rise above the ground. As if lifted by an invisible entity, it reached a height of about six-feet and stopped.

Suspended in midair, it stayed there!

Zhukovsky watched in uncomprehending terror at the suspended pot. Its leaves moving innocently in the newly gained height, within seconds it dawned on him, his ghastly fate.

The cumbersome 40-pound pot came crashing towards him. As if guided by some unseen force.

Zhukovsky screamed and struggled to avoid it. But the pot smashed into his hip. A howl erupted from him as excruciating pain shot through him. Tears burst in his eyes. He knew it had broken bone. Through blurry sight, he sought his assailant on top. But only empty space greeted him.

Before the flung pot barely came to rest, he heard a sinister sound.

Another low but a much heavier grating sound filled the air. A second heavier pot stood at the top of the stairs. The sight caused Zhukovsky to scream in terror. Slowly, it began rising in the air. He knew it was more lethal than the larger one, for with his injured hip, he could barely move.

The loud crashing outside seemed to revive Olga. Titbits of Zhukovsky boasting flashed through her memory. *That bastard Zhukovsky was the whole root of her misery!*

Only death could pay his debt. She tried to stand, but found it impossible. Her family’s misery had to be avenged!

Willing all her strength in her hands, she crawled to the bureau. Viktor stashed all his hunting rifles there. She painfully pulled it open, selected a piece. And checked it. Being a rural girl, she was familiar with it. She was going to blow Zhukovsky’s brains.

Opening the door, she crawled out, cradling the rifle like a precious child. She looked a fearful apparition; face bloodied and swollen; part of her hair plastered down with blood. Her eyes held no pain, fear, or helplessness. Now they were alert and wild, like a predator.

She continued to crawl the whole passage in time to see the metallic pot rise in the air and hurl downwards.

From the ground floor, there was the sound of running footsteps.

“Mercy…St Mikhail...Jesus Christ!” she heard Zhukovsky’s voice mewl.

She hastily crawled to the top of the stairs.

The pot smashed against his head, silencing him. He lay there, part of his head caved in with the impact, blood rapidly oozing from it. His open glassy eyes watching unseeingly at the top.

Olga looked contentedly at Zhukovsky’s inert form and smiled. Gevorg was avenged. Her family was avenged.

She sought around for her benefactor, but only felt a cold unpleasant breeze move over her. For a moment, cold finger tips caressed her face, and it was gone. “Viktor…Darling Viktor...” she called. “Please forgive me darling!”

A father had come to avenge his son’s death from the other side.

The sound of footsteps grew louder. It made her hurry she had to protect Gevorg.

6. Hell Hole in Kravchuk Dacha - The Aftermath

The police took an hour to gain entry into the flat. Olga had barricaded the door with her body. The police found her in a chaotic state. She was covered with blood and was hysterical and raving insanely about bringing her son back to life. When they did not pay attention, she tried to attack them. At last, she had to be sedated.

Old Mustafa threw up when he heard about the corpse kept with the food in the fridge. He also threw away the last piece of baked salmon fish. From now on, the thought of food made him sick. He wondered when he would be able to eat his next meal.

Yuri was the last of the policemen to leave the place. It was his job to lock and seal the flat. For one last time, he went through the rooms to check. Everything was in place. A silence settled through the place, filling it with melancholy.

Such feelings were often experienced in places where violent deaths occurred. Satisfied, he headed out. Just as he reached out, he heard a sound. A distinct sound of footsteps. He stopped, entered, and listened.

Moments later, he opened the door to exit, again he heard a sound. This time, it sounded like a giggle. He was not the one to get spooked. “Who is there?” he opened the door and shouted.

“Come out or I will shoot you!”

Viktor‘s photo frame hanging on the wall rattled violently.

Yuri did not wait; he rushed out, slammed the door shut. Locked and sealed it. Then he was running down the stairs. By the time he reached down, his hands were trembling visibly.

The Crazy Devdas

1. The Crazy Devdas – Beauty and the Beast

I love Shilpa with my life. Desperately, I want to marry her. I have brought her to my farm house to explain this to her. Convince her of my love. Remind her of the times I had done things in her interest, just to prove I love her. Things she too does not know. Also, to confess some evil I have done.

I have had women before, but with Shilpa it’s different. Yet, she cannot understand this; she can really be hard-headed. All women can be hard-headed at times.

Shilpa, my girlfriend, lies on the bed. Unconscious from my hard-hitting slaps. I feel sorry, yet I had to do it. Her wrists and ankles are tied to the bedpost. The rope has caused red welts as it chafes against her white baby skin. Her mouth is gagged with duct tape, but I have pierced a couple of holes in the tape to ease her breathing. This is the least I can do to minimize her pain. Seeing her in this plight brings tears to my eyes.

 I stand before her, admiring her innocent face, smoking marijuana and drinking vodka. I bend down and kiss her forehead, and then both her cheeks. They feel warm and smooth. Picking up a lipstick, I draw lips on the duct tape and kiss them.

I cannot wait for her to revive. I blow marijuana smoke over her face to awake her. Then realize it could put her into deeper sleep. Perhaps, if I sprinkle a few drops of vodka on her face, she will wake up. I do it.

There, that did the trick. She is stirring to consciousness. Her doe-like eyes are filled with fear as she catches sight of me. It pains me terribly to see her so. I reach out to touch and comfort her, but I can feel her cringe under my touch. Why is she behaving so insensitively? It is I who is the loser after falling in love with her. Why do some women behave so hard-hearted?

I move closer, get on my knees, and smack her across her cheek.

I feel her pain but cannot help screaming in her face. “Bitch, you have dashed all my hopes! Destroyed my life! Forced me to hurt you! I love you with all my life, my dear Shilpa. If only you realized how much I love you, all this would not have happened. Every time I proposed to you, you just had one answer. One bloody standard answer! You know Gopi that’s not possible. Besides, I love another. That was even before you met that Bastard you plan to marry. What is bloody wrong with me! Bloody Hell! I am well educated; hail from a rich and influential family, smart and fair. Damn it! I even belong to your community! Maybe I am a little on the shorter side and a wee bit scrawny. But I had promised you I would workout, tone up my physique. Even my personal trainer had advised me to give up this frequent use of marijuana and vodka. But the ache you gave me, made it impossible.”

Once again, she is beginning to cry. Damn these types of women! I move a little further away from her and soften my tone; maybe I can convince her to marry me.

“Love can be beautiful, but can be lethal, too. Along with love comes lust. That makes it lethal. It is impossible to separate the two. Everybody lusts, even God. If He did not, he would not create women. Now, is it wrong to lust? Shilpa, I confess I have an addiction towards women. I lust for them. I have never been with a whore, I swear. It is only those girls I pick up at the pub or the gym. I have been once or twice with a man and it feels yuck! That being the time, I was completely stoned. After falling in love with you, it has been with nobody else. And it will never be, I promise.”

Her expression has not changed. I blow smoke in her face and move away. I feel like banging my head on a rock. I sip my vodka and think of what else to say. If I cannot convince her, I will have to kill her. I cannot bear the thought of sharing her with someone else. Within a fortnight, she is to marry, and it makes me crazy to think of the *mehndi* on her hands and feet.

Once again, I move near her and kneel on the floor to reach her level. “Darling, let me tell you the first time I saw you, I instantly fell in love with you. But I knew you were the highly conservative type. Getting you would be impossible, but I told myself, ‘Nothing is impossible for Gopi Prabhakar’. I knew I could easily get close to you, and I did, sooner than you realized. It was our second year B.A., the date was 20th July. The rain was pouring hard and despite your umbrella, you were drenching wet. Your pink *salwar-kameez* was sticking to you like a second skin. I was in the canteen with my friends, watching you. I still remember your cherubic face; you had not even lost your baby fat. Those doe like innocent eyes, cute nose and lips. Rain water was streaming down your thick plaited hair. You looked just like a doll.”

I close my eyes and recollect the sight before continuing, “And Ah! Those wonderful earrings. Those huge wonderful earrings, suspended like chandeliers from your ears. Later on, if you remember, you misplaced them during a picnic. We all searched but did not find them. You believed they were lost. But actually I had stolen them. Sometimes when no one is around, I wear them and strut about. They are practically worthless, but to me, they are priceless. How I treasure them!”

2. The Crazy Devdas – The Joker’s Doomsday

Shilpa has now grown silent. The story has intrigued her. I better remind her of another before she cries. Now, I realize the root of the *‘The Arabian Nights.’*

“Some months later, after joining college, you told me you wanted a particular room in the hostel. The girl named Amrita, who occupied it, was not ready to sacrifice for you. Within a couple of days, you got the room, remember?”

This time, her eyes flickered at me in fear. Good, she was listening. “Then Amrita had an accident, hit-and-run they told you. Such hit-and-run incidents are a common thing here. A student high on weed or coke can easily do it and get away. It’s no big deal. But it was no accident, I engineered it. When I hit her bicycle with my car, I tell you, it was a sight. For over a few seconds, Amrita was airborne before hitting the rocky part on the side of the road. She had broken an arm, two ribs and a leg in two places. It took her about six months to recover.”

Before I can end, she is beginning to cry.

“What is with you?” I scream at her. “Are you daft or what? I tell you something to cheer you up and you sob sob sob. Did you not enjoy the stay in that room? Did you spare a thought for the poor Amrita lying all bandaged up in the hospital like an Egyptian mummy? I simply hate insensitivity, sweetheart.”

She continues to weep. Maybe, if I tell her something I really enjoyed, it will cheer her up, so I begin. “I loved your enthusiasm when I told you I wanted you to meet papa. You not only fixed my button but also suggested what clothes I should wear! Almost wifey like! You simply wowed me! Then you bowled me over with the respect you showed my father. The moment I introduced you to papa, you instantly bent and touched his feet. A gesture reserved mainly for the in-laws, a blessing. Again a wifey thing! It was my memorable moment. Papa has always pampered and supported me in everything I did. He knows everything about me. He was very much impressed with you. Yet, before leaving, he whispered, Gopi *beta*, don’t destroy your life and career after girls, they’re just not meant for you.”

Her indifference towards me continues. Her eyes are still fear laden. At this moment when I think of papa I believe what he said was right. But I will try, make her see sense. Make her realize how much she is indebted to me; remind her how I saved her from that joker, Manthan. But first I need to fix myself a fresh joint and a glass of vodka.

All this explaining can tire one down quickly.

Taking my joint and vodka, I sit beside her on the bed. Her thigh is close to mine. I can feel the warmth. It feels good. She tries to pull away. I pin her thigh down with my elbow. She squirms a bit, but in the end relents.

Only then, I begin. “Remember that joker, Manthan, in our college? He was a real number. A typical clown, oiled hair, soda-glasses, old-fashioned clothes of the 60’s. A typical village dog. Nobody would even talk to him, and how did you fall for him? You were really crazy Shilpa, right out of the loony bin. In the beginning I felt it was just sympathy, but soon the two of you were dating. Meeting in the canteen, going to movies in cheap cinemas, traveling by public transport. That *pariah* could not even afford to take you to a decent hotel! The climax came when I saw the two of you sharing an ice-cream! Even worse was when you nibbled the melted cream off his fingers and giggled. At that moment, I knew the piece of shit had to go. Had to be put away for good.”

I take another a sip before continuing, “What else, they arrested the dog with enough marijuana to stay in jail for a long, long… time. And you know how *just* the law is! They are literally waiting for such scapegoats…such peasant boys. I heard his father could not do a thing for the pauper and so he is serving at least a four-year

 sentence. I wonder how he got four years. My friend had put only a year's worth of marijuana in his *jhola*—cloth bag? Oh! Now I get it, the police put all the pending cases on your poor Romeo. What a bloody shame…!”

 Oh no! Once again her crying begins, but now audible sobs. It is almost like she is mourning for the dead.

“Shut up! Shut up…!” I scream. Crying is okay but this sobbing, I can’t bear it. “I saved you from a lifetime of poverty and this is what I get! You would have to work your arse out, in the fields. Cook on firewood. Sleep with half the village men! And God knows what! With me, I will give you the best of life. Money, jewelry, luxury…any damn thing on the face of the earth!”

3. The Crazy Devdas – The Confession

 Her sobbing has grown silent, but her body is still being racked by it. Pity fills my heart. I love her after all. I bend and kiss her on the duct tape. She squirms in distaste, as if I am a leper. Furious, I smack her on her face. It draws blood. I immediately regret. I should have known her dislike for joint and vodka.

It reminds me of the evening she had heard about poor Manthan’s arrest. She came to me crying bitterly. I felt sorry for her, but that bastard the poor peasant boy deserved what he got. Imagine making my girl suck his wretched fingers!

But that evening, she was inconsolable. There was nothing I could do. Just for a fleeting moment, I felt like telling her the truth. Maybe she would see the truth and cheer up. But then better sense prevailed, and I suggested we go to a pub…

Should I confess and tell her what happened that night? Maybe, maybe my honesty will impress her. “Darling, remember the night we went to the pub.”

At this, her eyes, wet with tears, turned to me. The fear had not left her eyes. What would I have to do to replace it with love?

But I continue, “With a little persuasion from me, you were ready to come. I was elated; at last my dream girl was at my beckon. The others in my group were reluctant. They were ashamed to take you along because of your tacky clothes and *behnji type* – non-turn-on like look. Nothing was going to deter me from taking you along. I saw this as our first date. I got you done up at the beauty parlour. Then I got you a designer dress. Nothing flashy, something modest. Your discomfort was clear and you were ungainly. But to me, you were the most beautiful woman in the world. You were starry-eyed and apprehensive when you entered the pub. It was the first time you had been to such an extravagant place. After all, it was one of the most expensive pubs in the locality. Once we settled down, I showed you the butterfly tattoo on my arm. This same tattoo I got here.” I pull up my sleeve to reveal the tattoo. “Can you see it?” I ask her.

She stares at it and looks at me with the same fear-filled eyes.

“Do you know what your comment was?” I demand. “Do you remember, eh?” For a moment, I lock my eyes in hers. The recollection only brings me anger. “*Arre baba*, we were on a date. We were supposed to say nice things to each other, even if we didn’t mean it. Didn’t you lie to the peasant boy sometime or the other? But no, you told me, Gopi, it does not suit you. Your arm is too skinny. My arm is too skinny! My arm is too skinny! I swore at that moment. I felt like auctioning you to the many *bhadhwas*-pimps in the pub. But I had let it pass.”

I am too angry to speak another word. Gulping my vodka, I go for a refill. When I return, I have a nasty edge in my tone. “Do you know what I did for revenge? It was one of the best things. I cherish it even now.”

Fear is even more intense in her eyes. She is attempting to say something. I kneel on the floor and move closer to her. Our faces are a few inches away from each other.

“Do you recall where you woke up the next morning? Remember Baby, remember. Yeah that’s right. In a hotel, on a bed. And where was I? I was sitting ‘innocently’ on a chair, reading the newspaper. First, you thought you had been raped but later you were sure it did not happen. From then on, to you, I was the good samaritan who simply protected you. You were even grateful to me. But if you remember the night in the pub. You felt drowsy. You blamed it on all the smoke and noise around you. But you were wrong. I had your drink spiked. Even before you entered my car, you were completely stoned. I took you to the hotel, all the way you were babbling about that peasant boy. How you loved him…! How you miss him…! And all that shit.”

Even now, I can feel the anger bubbling in me, exactly the way it did that night. But I had to let her know, so I continue. “I took you to a room. At first I thought I would make love to you. But after hearing about the peasant boy, I was furious. So I decided to teach you a lesson. Since you value your self-respect so much, I attacked it. I undressed you, took photographs with my mobile. They are on my laptop whenever I need to pleasure myself…”

Before I could end my sentence, she starts sobbing. “What are you sobbing for?” I yell “Don’t you ever have an urge to pleasure yourself? Haven’t you ever pleasured yourself?”

The sobbing grows loud, though muffled. I cannot wait any longer. It’s been five hours since she has been missing from home. Eventually the police are bound to come searching for her here. For the very last time, I am going to ask her if she will marry me.

4. The Crazy Devdas – Spurned!

I take a hard pull at my joint and a deep swallow of vodka. Decision making can be really tough. I walk up to Shilpa. Fear has replaced terror in her eyes. She has sensed something has changed. I climb into her bed.

She tries to move away, but the binds prevent her. I am close enough and can feel her body heat. I feel aroused but ignore it. I am not here for pleasures of the flesh but for true love. Where will she find a lover who bares the soul like an open book?

With a thudding heart, I propose to her, “Shilpa, will you marry me?”

It doesn’t take a moment; she answers with a headshake. *No.*

“Are you sure?” I ask mildly. No use losing my cool.

No, she shakes her head again.

I arise calmly. As I had reckoned, some women can be hard-headed! There is no way of reasoning with them. If I can’t have her, nobody shall. I go to my vodka, finish the drink neat. I make a firm decision.

I walk up to her. Calmly, I begin to undress her. She tries to resist, but the ropes are strong enough.

She now lies undressed on the bed. Her eyes are on me. For her benefit, I turn to her and begin to undress myself. If I can’t have her, nobody shall. First, I strip off my shirt, then my trousers.

*I am now standing in my bra and panties*. I strap on my favourite dildo.

I move close to her and whisper, “I will first show you how a man makes love and then a woman. You decide who is better. But before, I better take this off.” I strip the duct tape, not too gently.

Instantly, her pleading starts “Please Gopi, please let me go… how many times I have told you our love is not possible. The two of us are ladies; you know, I am not lesbian.”

“Who cares!” I say, hot with passion, “I shall convert you; besides, homosexuality is legalized by the law too.” I climb over, my dildo aimed at her. And then she does the unthinkable.

She spits in my face and cries. “This is my hate for you.”

It hits me on my face, hot and slimy. I try wiping the stuff, completely appalled.

Before I wipe it off, she spits again, “This is for taking my nude photographs!”

Again, it hits me squarely on my face. I am too stunned. Can a human fall to this level of depravity? I simply don’t believe it.

Before I can wipe the gooey stuff, she spits twice, “This is for the girl, Amrita, whom you nearly killed. And my hero Manthan” And smiles acidly.

 I am overcome with rage. How dare she! A low peasant Manthan! I rush to the drawer, get out my low caliber pistol, and point it to her forehead. With clenched teeth and trembling grip. *Only a bluff*.

She smiles back at me, a sardonic one that challenges me.

“I will marry him immediately even while he serves his sentence, my supreme lover!”

 I am infuriated. Bang!

5. The Crazy Devdas – Together At Last

 A small hole appears on her forehead. Blood begins to trickle out. Slowly, the light in her eyes dims and fades off. Her breathing gets slower and slower. She does not struggle or squirm in pain.

I gently close her eyes. She’s dead. My Shilpa is dead! It then registers to me. I have killed her.

“Why did she make me do it?” I scream loudly, “Why? Why? Why?”

I rush to the vodka, finish it off and begin to cry like a baby.

I am suddenly aware of the police siren, somewhere, down the road. They have come for me. I have lost count of time. It’s nearly evening.

For the last time I go to Shilpa. She is sleeping like a baby except for that ugly hole in her forehead. I bend down; kiss her on her forehead above the ugly hole. Then on both her cheeks, they now feel cool and smooth. Her lips are still curved with that sardonic smile, yet I kiss them. They feel dead.

I feel desperately lonely and depressed. The siren sounds louder now. They are at my door. “Goodbye, Shilpa.” I whisper lovingly.

Keeping my eyes on her lifeless body, I put the pistol into my mouth. I can still imagine her in that rain soaked *salwar-kameez*…Rain water streaming down her thick plaited hair…those huge earrings suspended like chandeliers…

 There is a ring on my door. They have come. “Goodbye, my doll,” I whisper once more. “I hope you are mine in the next life.” I push the gun further till the muzzle touches the roof of my mouth.

The ringing gets incessant. Someone calls my name and orders me to open the door. They can go to hell! I am going after my doll! I pull the trigger...

CODE AMONG THE APACHES

1. Code Among the Apaches – Slick Ambush

The Apache raid was swift and clean. Four white soldiers struggled in their death spasms. Throats slit, gushing blood was quickly leached up by the thirsty desert floor. The Apache marauders worked with urgency, quickly hauling the corpses inside the adobe building. Others worked to wipe up any signs of the skirmish or their presence. The stagecoach would be arriving soon.

The stagecoach was the lone moving object on the desert floor. Two guards rode with rifles drawn on the roof of the stagecoach. Their eyes were red-rimmed with the dust and heat. By continuously scouting the sun, blasted cacti dotted landscape with their sights. The white-hot sun did not seem to bother them. For they were riding through *Apacheria*-Apache land, where a hint of relaxation could mean death.

A joyous shout from the guard atop the stagecoach caused anxious eyes to seek the terrain ahead. Far in the distance was the welcoming glint of metallic blades...Windmills! The silvery blades whirled lazily in the blistering desert sun. Sucking precious water from the bowels of the earth with every whirl they made. The windmill stood sentinel over a squat, sienna colored adobe and timber structure. It served as the stagecoach station—El Stringo.

The approaching stagecoach was not acknowledged by the station’s workmen. This worried the new arrivals. Something was amiss. The stagecoach halted, and the driver slid out a rifle. Without a word, the two guards alighted. All the passengers-four men and a woman sat petrified, having enough sense to remain silent. Only the horses moved restlessly. They were attracted to the scent of water close by.

The stagecoach stood in the desert’s deep silence. Only the rhythmic metallic clicks of the twirling windmill blades disturbed this silence. The desert landscape has its own brand of silence. Akin to its barren landscape, tawny colored sand, dotted with yucca and prickly pear cacti. All this flanked by the cloudless blue sky, stamped by the white fiery sphere of the sun.

The trio moved to the station cautiously. Guard no1 headed towards the adobe’s entrance. While the other two followed as backup.

Inside the coach, fear was the strongest emotion. The passengers waited, the desert waited, expectantly. Only the incessant dripping water from the faucet into a man-sized wooden trough sounded.

The female passenger tried to divert her mind to the cheerful silvery trickle of water into the trough. It reminded her of a coffin. Just as she reprimanded herself of her negative thoughts, she choked on a gasp of fear.

A dark-skinned figure arose from the water-filled trough.

The vibrant buzz of blowflies told Guard no1 what lay inside the station. Nevertheless, he walked in.

Dark and drenched, the figure stood in the trough, raised an arm and flung a dagger. Just as it caught the stagecoach driver between his shoulder blades, the female passenger got back her voice, she screamed.

Guard no1 jerked his head towards the scream and so failed to see a pair of legs smash into his chest. He hit the wall as an Apache swung down and buried a tomahawk into his chest.

The driver began to fall and Guard no2 turned his rifle to the trough. A patch of ground exploded into a shower of sand and a sand covered apparition shot out. A knife flew and hit Guard no2 painfully in his belly.

One of the male passengers tried to grab the coach’s reins to ride away. Two arrows struck the leading horse in its neck, causing it to rear up violently, unsettling the other. Within seconds, they were surrounded by men.

Their captors were Apache…dark skinned, squat, brawny men. Dark-colored headbands held their ragged long hair in place. Their rag-tag clothes were those scavenged from the corpses of soldiers, ranchers and cowhands. They looked incongruous in their outfits, misplaced heads on misplaced bodies.

A cruel looking warrior strode forward; Mongoloid eyes, high cheekbones, flattened nose and thin lips. His coal-black eyes watched each passenger, coldly reptilian-like. His lips seemed to stretch into a smile but ended in a smirk, showing pure disdain.

“Loco Chita!”He proudly thumped his chest in self introduction.

Gasps of fear erupted from the passengers. Time seemed to stop. Silence dropped. Loco Chita was the most dreaded Apache outlaw in *Apacheria*. He seemed to petrify everything, even nature.

Suddenly, all were aware of the struggling wounded horse. In blind fury, he drew out a machete and slashed at the neck. Hacking again and again with contempt. As if the injured animal should not have been interfering in his proceedings.

The desert silence amplified the painful, harsh death cries of the horse. The woman fainted and fell. Nobody moved. The heat and the silence were dense. Other horses snickered nervously. The machete threatened to strike, but stopped as fast as it started. A live horse was worth a lot in these parts.

Loco Chita turned and ordered in a guttural tone. They took the three male passengers captive. They roughed up the woman and brought her to her senses. She would satisfy their carnal pleasures later. The male passengers would quench their blood lust.

Along the western skies, the sun had reached its abode. Over El Stringo vultures circled the skies. Ready to land for the abundant flesh-feast spread on the desert floor. Three men lay staked to the desert floor, their skin badly sun burned, pink and blistered.

The woman lay naked; her legs bloodied from the waist down. Her senses were lost from senseless beatings.

Yards away lay the corpses of four soldiers, two guards, and the coach driver. Beyond this lay the roasted, half-eaten carcass of the horse. Hardly did the Apaches move away than the vultures swooped down in numbers. The sun turned blood red to match its shade with the carnage at El Stringo.

2. Code Among the Apaches – Apache War-Horse

The bereaved man sat nursing his tequila. Candle lights etched the lines of sorrow deeper into his face. He had lost two sons and a daughter-in-law in the El Stringo’s carnage. They were the last of his kin. Now his life and the large amount of wealth he had amassed meant nothing to him. All he wanted was to watch Loco die, slowly and painfully. All he aimed to do was to avenge the death of his family.

So he had hired a bounty hunter Jusaz, a half-breed Mexican all the way from Mexico. The half-breed was no different from the Apaches, even worse.

The bereaved man had offered him a huge sum of gold for Loco’s corpse. And double if he could get the renegade Apache alive. Now all the man could do was to sit in his lavish *hacienda* and wait for news from Jusaz and his band.

The old Apache, Jubela, worked alone in his lodge, on a wooden carving. Until he was disturbed by his trusted lieutenant Viegaz. “Guards come to see you *Jefe*—chief.”

One guard peeped in. “Captain Franklin wants to talk to yo’ Chief, come pronto!”

Captain Franklin Canby headed the garrison of Fort Santiago. The captain was an unpleasant man and was disliked by his own men, too. People acquainted with him said he was a cross between a coyote and a sidewinder. It was always bad when he summoned someone out of the blue.

Old Jubela sighed and stood up; it was never good to keep the captain waiting.

Outside the lodge, the morning heat was just growing. Residents of the other lodges were busy in their morning chores. They silently greeted Jubela as he passed, heading towards the fort. He was an elder and revered by everyone on the reservation.

The log and adobe structured Fort Santiago was built on a bluff. Meant to keep a watch over the Apache reservations on the dry arroyo below. To the existing cannons, a few more howitzers were added. All of them directed to the reservation below.

“Ah welcome, O Great Chief!” the captain called when he saw Jubela. The mockery in his voice was evident. He remained seated, a half-filled whisky glass on his table, and he waved the old man to a crude wooden chair. The loyal Viegaz followed, but was rudely waved out by the captain.

Captain Franklin was a burly and balding man with fuzzy eyebrows and a mustache. A squint in his eyes gave him a permanent look of jeering. He greedily gulped the whisky and wiped the dribble on his unshaven jaw with the back of his hand.

Only then he began to tell Jubela about the atrocities committed by Loco.

Jubela sat in a mummified stance, listening. His face was deeply lined with wrinkles; long steel gray hair parted in the center. Slowly, the stance broke and the old man sighed deeply. This old Indian was the grandfather of Loco Chita and greatly pained to hear of Loco’s infamous activities. The hot-headed Loco claimed his killings to be a war against the Palefaces or the US citizens who had grabbed all his *Apacheria* —all Apache land.

Vast territories of New Mexico, Arizona and some part of Old Mexico across the border comprised to make up *Apacheria*. The Apache were simple people living off the barren desert land in small communities called *rancherias*. Often, they raided the other Indian tribes, like the Hopis or the Navajo. It was their way until the Palefaces arrived in search of the cursed *oro*—gold. The newcomers were encroaching their land by guile or by force. Turning the very owners into outcast or outlaws.

In return, they had the Apaches displaced on small lands called reservations. Here they were numbered like cattle and fed on rationed food. Jubela and the last of his tribesmen were on one such reservation, High Shoulder.

Loco’s activities did not make Jubela and his kin’s lives any better. Though to the world Loco was labeled a rebel, his grandfather knew he was nothing but a blood lusty Indian. As his name suggested, *Loco*—meaning Crazy in crude border land Spanish.

Every time Loco slaughtered or marauded the US citizens, dire effects were felt on the reservations. Two rationed meals a day were reduced to one. Bread was moldy, and a maggot was found in the beef.

The plight of the tribe mattered much to Jubela, for he was their *Jefe*—Chief. The once strong able-bodied warriors were corrupted by the Paleface guards with *tizwin*—whisky. Turning them into a silly bunch of idiots. Women too were to `weak and sick to bear children. The once proud race of the Jicarilla Apache would soon end...disappear like a pebble into a lake without creating a ripple.

 The US Government or Great Whitefather, as nicknamed by the Apaches, had promised Jubela a piece of land in *Apacheria*. There, his people would be free, again, to hunt deer and desert pigs. Run with the wind. Tread through the mountain paths as their forefathers did...

But Loco did not believe in this dream. He never trusted Whitefather. He trusted no skin other than red. Loco had to be stopped, but the paleface soldiers were of no match for him. He was in element with the desert. He could live off the desert like a cactus.

Seeing Jubela remain silent, the captain raised his voice, “To catch Loco, need someone equal to him. I hear there is only one man equal to Loco, his own half-brother…Cole... Get ready, old man. We‘ll go visit Cole.”

A queasy look appeared on the old man’s face. He stood up. “No…Cole… not do it. He is true Apache…

“I know how to bend any of yo’ vermin Injuns. Ifyo’ don’t do it. I will find Cole.”

When Jubela emerged from the quarters, Viegaz could see he was very agitated. “Captain know nothing of Apache.” He grumbled. “Cole will never go after Loco. Cole is stubborn Apache. Cole is learnt the code of Apache well…”

3. Code Among the Apaches – The Squirming Death

Their captured Apache lay bloodied and broken, physically, but not in spirit. He had been punched, kicked, and belted. His lip was torn, the nose bone and a few teeth broken. One eye had probably lost vision and his naked back covered with blood.

Yet, he was not ready to divulge the whereabouts of Loco. The Apaches were a close-knit clan. They knew the doings of each other.

Jusaz sat atop his mount, running his fingers through his beard. He watched the tortured Indian. The half-breed Mexican was tall for his type. He had a hirsute face, thick eyebrows, a mustache and a beard.

The torture had been going on since morning. The heat was getting to his men. But the Apache had not reached the limit of endurance. He had simply lain there grunting in pain, occasionally.

Jusaz knew the Apache and their kind. They were stubborn as mules, even worse. Days of torture could not break them.

*These savages were like animals!,* mused Jusaz. This savage was of no use to him. He was too weak to speak, forget standing. Jusaz cast his sight on the squirming squaw, the Apache’s woman.

All was not lost. She would not know of Loco but they were other ways to make her pay, he reckoned lustfully. Besides, her scalp would fetch a bounty. The Mexican Government and the wealthy landowners paid handsomely for Apache scalps.

Jusaz felt anger burn in him. All this for nothing. “Throw the pig to the *hormiga*,” he ordered.

Two of his men half-lifted…half-dragged the limp Apache some distance away. They stopped before a foot wide circular hole in the desert floor. Stepping delicately, they placed the Apache carefully over it.

As he began to land over it, his good eye opened wide in horror. And a single syllable escaped his bloodied mouth. “Nooo…”

Within moments, they were swarming all over the Apache. Tiny creatures, but potent enough to bite that stung like acid. They were Colorado *hormiga*—the red desert fire ants. In minutes, they killed their victims. And within hours, they devoured the corpse. In a short time, only the Apache’s bones would be left to be bleached by the sun.

4. Code Among the Apaches – The Uncrowned Warlord

The Arizonian sun was at its peak. The ground radiated enough heat to fry eggs. Yellow brown sand stretched for miles and miles. The palomino carried his rider without being guided via its reins. The horse trotted only when the adobe came within sight.

Its rider, Cole, now stirred. Not that he was dozing; brought up among the Apaches he had inherited all their traits. The basic rule was never to relax. Part of his blood he owed to his Apache father and some to his paleface mother whom he had never seen.

Cole was dressed in a paleface’s attire-jeans, shirt and a Stetson. Under all this clothing, he was physically built like an Apache. Tall, wiry, sun browned skin, lustrous shoulder-length black hair parted in the center. Only his face betrayed his white inheritance-a pair of light-colored eyes. Weather-beaten lines clustered at the edge of his eyes, making him look older than he was.

He reached the corral and dismounted, his eyes sighting the smallish vegetable garden. Corn, peppers and pumpkins grew on it. They were fragile, almost at the point of wilting. The tremendous heat and poor sustenance from the soil was the reason. But he knew it would survive with a little water to tide his family through the hot desert summer. He looked up at the cloudless sky. The rains were weeks away.

Suddenly, he stilled and turned his sight to the east. He heard them before he could see them. His hand instinctively went for his Winchester rifle. A man could not relax in this place.

Over the horizon, a cloud of dust appeared; judging by its size, there would be over half a dozen riders. Within moments, through the shimmering heat waves, riders materialized. In an instance he recognized their uniform. Soldiers! Six of them!

He gently eased out the rifle from the saddle. Soldiers were no better than other hostiles. Solidly, he rapped the palomino on its rump, sending it scampering away.

Just outside the corral, Captain Franklin stopped his men, eyeing the adobe warily. He gestured his men to spread out. Satisfied, he called out. “Cole…Cole we come in peace.”

For a few moments, nothing moved. “Where are you, damn Injun…you half-breed?” the captain hissed.

Instantly, the silence was broken by the metallic sound of feeding a cartridge into a rifle.

“Dismount and put your hands in the air, soldiers!” A voice ordered. It sounded directly behind the captain.

As the captain dismounted, he called loudly, “Your *Abejo*—grandfather, sent us. He has sent a message.”

Very slowly, Cole walked before them, a Winchester in his hands.

“He wants you to kill Loco…” continued the captain.

There was a smug look on Cole’s face. “*Abejo* would never want me to kill my brother. Stop lying, soldier!” He pointed the Winchester right into the captain’s face.

“Alright…alright damn Injun!” cried the captain. “The *army* wants you to kill Loco. In return, you‘ll get a reward…a big reward.”

Cole remained expressionless. The Winchester unwavering.

“Also land…a good piece of it. With plenty water…Maybe ten to a dozen cattle head…” continued the captain.

“Tell your army, soldier, we do not break Apache code and kill each other for money. We are Apache not Palefaces.” Cole answered. “Now mount up and leave or I shoot you for trespassing my land.”

The captain mounted the horse and swung it around to face Cole. “Don’t flatter yo’rself…Cole. Yo’re neither Apache nor Paleface. Yo’re a half-breed…a Pariah. Yo’ don’t belong to either side.”

Cole remained silent, waving him out with the rifle.

“Yo’ ave made a bad mistake, half-breed.” Hissed the captain. “The next time we meet I shall ride down yo’ cattle and yo’r garden and raze down this house. Yo ‘ll beg me forgiveness…”

Cole let off two rounds in the air, startling the animal. The captain grabbed the reins and broke into a gallop. “I‘ll fix yo’ half-breed! I swear!” he shouted over his shoulder.

 In answer, Cole let off another round of bullets. But he knew he had just won the first round. The army could be a very dangerous adversary. Yet, now his thoughts were concerned for Jubela and his brethren on the reservation. He was not ignorant of their misery. His refusal to kill Loco would add to their suffering.

 He was taught not to harm an Apache brethren for no reason. It was a law-the strict code all over *Apacheria*. Loco was his brother. He had a part of his blood in him. He was an Apache, and so was Cole. Surely, he could not harm another Apache for no reason.

 Cole watched the soldiers melt gradually into the shimmering heat waves. He wondered what made them so sure of him of tracking and killing Loco. No doubt, Cole and Loco were the best students of grandfather. The former being a shade better.

Under grandfather, they had learned the Apachean way of hunting, tracking, stalking and killing. And the vital thing-surviving the most inhospitable terrain in the world.

It had been years since Cole had practiced his skills, while Loco had honed it every second in those years. A settled life dulls such skills.

Lost in thoughts he was suddenly aware of Isobella beside him. Her eyes tearfully fixed on him. No doubt she had overheard the talks. She was Mexican, brown, delicately built but hardworking, just like her peon ancestors. She was Cole’s wife, ripe with a three-month child, which was yet to show on her flat belly. Isobella knew border Spanish and sparse words of Apache.

She was the best thing that happened to him. He pulled her close to him. “I am not going after Loco,” he promised.

 She clung to him and wept. The riders were no longer visible, and the desert had settled. Cole lifted her gently and carried her in.

5. Code Among the Apaches – The Desert Phantom

Captain Franklin entered the reservation with a jubilant look. “Serve everyone with *tizwin* and beef. Today we celebrate.” He bellowed loudly.

One of the Apache asked, “Why Captain?”

“Cole accepted the reward to track and kill Loco.” the captain answered triumphantly. “Loco is good as dead. Nobody is better than Cole!”

Many of the Apaches were sorry, but at least their life would change for the better. And the festivities began in ear4nest.

When Jubela heard this news, he stormed into the captain’s quarters, Viegaz in tow. The captain was drinking with his officers. “Captain, you lie about Cole…Cole never will agree to kill his brother!” the old man accused.

The officers jeered at the ranting old man.

The old man suddenly looked composed. “Trust me, captain, you die in one of my grandson’s hands.” A silence followed as he walked out.

When the captain was sure that Jubela was out of hearing, he winked at his officers. “Who will know the truth? Sooner than ever, the news will reach Loco and he will go after Cole. Such news spreads far and wide. And the half-breed will have to defend himself. Either he will kill Cole or if not, the army will be waiting for him…Trust me Loco will never escape alive.”

Wild laughter echoed in the quarters.

Out of hearing, the old man whispered to Viegaz. “Get Wari, the Tarahumara to watch over Cole’s adobe. If ever Loco comes I would like to know…”

The Tarahumara were endurance runners; desert Indians who could travel the narrowest footpaths on the canyon walls with ease. They easily traversed boulder strewn desert floors and detritus covered canyon walls inaccessible by horses and mules. Long distances were covered in a short time.

The cluster of *jacals*—a meager shelter of dried brush and timber, signified Apache. Loco Chita and his men sat in council under one such shelter on the slopes of the Sierra Madre. After the El Stringo’s carnage, he had crossed the border into Old Mexico, on the Mexican side of the Rio Grande.

 His half-a-dozen plus renegade broncos could smell worry on him. They all knew the source—Cole. The terrible heat seemed to insulate the tension within the *jacal*.

It was only until Loco broke the silence. “We go visit my brother Cole.”His dark face broke into a grin and a deep guttural laughter exploded from his throat.

The council knew it would be bad...but fun. Soon the Sierra Madre resounded with evil laughter.

The Tarahumara’s presence was discovered quickly. Cole realized it was Wari, one of those harmless, slow-witted reservation Indians.

It peeved him to think he was constantly being watched. He felt the need to go down to the reservation and have a talk with the old man. But he let it pass; grandfather had done it to protect him.

Besides, the Tarahumara was like one of the most trusted broncos. A few years ago, during a raid, Cole and Jubela had rescued him from a cruel death in the hands of Mexican *bandidos*—bandits. Then, Wari was a young man barely initiated into manhood. Since then, he had stayed with the Apaches and not returned to his tribe in Mexico.

It was unusual to see him away from the reservation. Captain Franklin kept a tight leash over his Indians. They were never permitted to get away from the reservation. But Wari was an exception. He was a Tarahumara, not an Apache. So Cole let him stay.

The news spread all over the territory. Jusaz received this news with glee. It had been days since he and his bounty hunters had scoured the desert lands. Tortured and killed several Apaches, yet he had not met with success. Loco had disappeared or simply dropped out of sight. Or even worse, the Mexican army might have killed him.

He was not sure if Loco was in Arizona or crossed into the Sierra Madre mountains of Mexico. And without such information, it was difficult to hunt an Apache. *If only he had a region to start!*

With every passing day, he grew worried. *What if his boss recalls the offer?* After all, he was being paid a hefty purse for the job. Even if he worked hard for the rest of his life, he would not amass it. The life of a bounty hunter was short.

 So when he heard Cole was ready to ride out to hunt Loco, he knew his job was done. After all, Cole was a half-breed Indian and had all Apache knowledge. All he had to do was follow Cole until he reached Loco and take over from there. This would be the easiest job ever. So, he sent a scout ahead to watch over Cole. He and his band would follow.

Even if Cole did not comply, Jusaz had persuasive methods to do so. He called his Apache scout and devised a plan.

Hours after Cole herding his cattle over the horizon; Wari spied a group of riders. They emerged through the heat waves and rode towards the adobe. He recognized them instantly, Loco with his *lobos*—wolves!

Dutifully, Wari took the fastest route up the canyon wall instead of down the desert floor to do his job.

Isobella did not see the Apache band till they were on the adobe. She stood surrounded by this pack of ragged, dark-skinned men eyeing her wolfishly. To every Mexican, an Apache was the worst nightmare. Leading the pack was Loco. He grinned at her. She trembled in fear.

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As they drew nearer, they smelled like animals. The noxious blend of fear and odor caused her to sway. One thought ran through her as she dissolved into blackness. She would never see Cole again.

The sun had burned everything to a crisp in the valley. But Cole had chosen a spot well for his cattle. There was enough grass for them. A hidden creek watered the place between the towering slabs of sandstone. Ancient creeks that were known only to the Apache.

He swam in the cool waters of the creek as he watched his cattle graze. Another hour or so and he would herd his cattle back to his adobe. Absorbed in his thoughts, he failed to notice a figure appear on the edge of a canyon wall.

The shadow fell across his pool and he dived for his Winchester on the bank.

A familiar voice stopped him. “*Hola*, Brother Cole!”

Cole looked up to see Wari waving at him from the canyon top. Shielding his eyes against the sun, he waved back the greeting.

“Loco has arrived at your adobe, Brother Cole!” Wari informed.

Cole waited for him to say something more, but he remained silent. “Tell him I welcome him.” Cole answered.

Even before he finished his answer, Wari had disappeared from the edge of the canyon wall.

Cole emerged out of the pool, curious. *Why had Loco come to meet him? After such a long time? Surely it was not a cordial visit? Nor had he come with harm intent. Loco, he knew, strictly abided by the code of the Apache*.

He dressed up and herded his cattle, starting for the adobe.

6. Code Among the Apaches – The Abomination

The moment his adobe came in sight, Cole knew something was wrong. Isobella was not at the doorway. Most unlike her, maybe she had not anticipated his early arrival, he reckoned.

But when he reached closer with his herd and yet she did not show up, he knew something was wrong. Then his doubts were confirmed. High in the sky he saw them, turkey buzzards, the harbingers of death-vultures. A few were circling above the adobe. Soon their numbers would increase. He drew his Winchester and rode through the cattle ahead.

His eyes scoured the adobe; the hunter’s instinct coming alive. The structure looked unmolested, yet something was amiss. It was too quiet for comfort.

He slid off the back of his palomino and dropped to the ground. Carefully, he studied the place. The hot air and silence had settled around the adobe. Up in the sky, the number of vultures had increased. They hung lower. It worried him; he could not wait any longer. Quickly, he arose and bolted in.

Inside the adobe, everything looked normal. The pleasant coolness, the semi-gloom, the quietude…yet his warning senses were pounding.

“Isobella?” he called and waited for an answer.

“Isobella?” he called louder. “Are you there?” When he received no answer, he rushed to the inner room.

 Lying on the bed was a figure covered in a bloodstained bedspread. It appeared to be a small sized corpse covered from head to foot... Isobella! Cole’s heart cried. But his face remained stony.

Slowly but stiffly, Cole uncovered the figure. He almost recoiled in horror at the sight. Looking back at him was a grotesque thing.

A disfigured, ugly corpse lay on his bed. The face was a bloodied mess, slashed with multiple knife wounds. A slit ran all the way from ear to ear. The tip of the nose was cut. The left breast was cleanly sliced off. *What abomination was this thing?*

 It took him moments to realize…the grotesque thing was his beautiful Isobella!

Cole turned away, his being crying out in grief. Every wound...every mutilation had a significance. Mutilated face and cut nose was a punishment for infidelity among the Apache women. A cut breast meant branding her a whore after death. And what was worst was that all these were done while the victim was alive. But by looking at the Isobella’s neck wound, he could say that her disfigurements were inflicted after she was dead.

He clutched her still warm body and wept. *Who had killed his Isobella? Why had they killed her? She did not deserve such a terrible death!* She was innocent as the trees and the birds. He held her and looked around the room at particularly nothing. Memories of tender moments spent together surged through his mind. The day he had brought her here…the first time they had made love…the time that she had told him she was pregnant…He gripped her body tighter and wept. He could not imagine life without her.

Whoever had done this would pay with his life, he swore. Then he remembered Wari’s words. Loco has arrived at your adobe, Brother Cole! Had the *malo*—evil Loco killed his woman? But why? He had done no harm to Loco. But the manner of killing had Apache written all over it.

The raucous sounds of squabbling buzzards disturbed his thoughts. It emerged from the backyard. Picking up his Winchester, he hurried out.

The vultures had descended in his backyard in numbers, squabbling and biting each other. They were all flocking to something that looked like a human body; he hurried.

On his approach, the vultures scuttled away in haste. The figure was sprawled on the ground, in a prostrate manner. It appeared inert and familiar. *Wari…!*Cole realized with a jolt. He rushed forward and knelt beside Wari, turning him over.

The Tarahumara looked at Cole with a macabre stare. Wari’s eyes were unblinking and unseeing; two rivulets of bloody tears ran down his face. Both of Wari’s eyelids were

sliced out. Sticky pools of blood had collected inside his eyes. His mouth was filled with blood. It seemed like he had drowned in his own blood. But Cole knew better. Wari’s tongue too had been sliced and his throat slashed.

Again, these mutilations had significance; sliced eyelids meant punishment for seeing things that were not supposed to. A sliced tongue meant punishment for snitching. Wari was not as fortunate as Isobella. All these disfigurements were done while alive. His body felt warm. The bloody task had been committed recently.

*Wari had been killed as a punishment for informing Cole about something…What?* *Loco’s arrival at the adobe?*

Just then, he sighted Wari’s hands. One fist was clenched. It was like the dead man was clutching something. Cole pried open the stiffening fingers and released the object. It felt familiar. He held it at eye level. It was a wooden trinket, an heirloom. An intricate wooden carving of an eagle with the trunk of a coyote! It was the symbol of the Eagle Clan to which he and Loco belonged.

Only the duo was privileged to carry it as they would become the next chief of the Jicarilla Apache Eagle Clan.

Rage hit him like an electric shock as the truth dawned. His innards trembled. Loco would die for it, he swore. “Loco” hissed Cole, raising the heirloom high in the sky. “Loco will die by my hands…I swear by *Ussen*…” The look in Cole’s eyes was like smoldering coals. “Loco will not live long…”

Cole lifted Wari’s corpse and walked to the adobe. The brown feathery birds stayed their glassy stare on him over their cruel hooked beaks as he walked past them.

It was dusk when Cole finished digging the two graves. Wari’s grave he dug facing the east, according to Apache custom. He gave it a silent burial.

Isobella never believed in *Ussen*. She believed in the Man On the Cross. He dug her grave beside the pumpkin patch; it was her favorite spot. She was mostly found near the patch tending the pumpkins. It always reminded her of her childhood days in Mexico.

He lifted the corpse and knelt, unwilling to put it in. Rested his head against her corpse and wept silently, rocking gently. He did not know how long he did so, but when he realized, false dawn was creeping in the dark skies.

 “It is time for you to sleep, Isobella,” he spoke to her softly, “care for our child. I have a long way to go. Wait for me with the Man On the Cross. I will soon come to meet you...”

 He slowly placed her in the grave and tumbled soil into it. Hurriedly, he erected a cross over the hump of soil. He entered the adobe and gathered up a few things. Picking up the kerosene lamp, he emptied its contents on the bed and struck a match to it.

Without another glance behind, he left the adobe. He walked to the corral, saddled his palomino, and set the cattle free.

 By sunrise the adobe was a flaming inferno. Its heat was scorching the already wilted vegetable garden to the sunbaked ground. Nothing moved in the sprawling desert for miles and miles.

7. Code Among the Apaches – The Bounty Hunter’s Game

 It is said that a man becomes careless on two occasions; overjoyed or in

grief. And of course, on being excessively drunk. So it was plain ill-luck that Cole rode without caution. All he wanted was Loco’s blood on his knife and hands. Revenge for raping, killing, and dishonoring his wife.

 And so Jusaz and his band could pick up Cole’s trail. The trail took them across the border into the Sierra Madre Mountains of Mexico. This was truly Apache heartland. The Mexican half-breed and his band grew cautious.

Loco knew Cole was coming for him. Also knew why. He was in council with his broncos.

“Cole, my brother, is coming for me. Loco shall not hide... Loco shall face him, as I have no fear of Cole. Those who wish to leave may go. We are fighters of our freedom, not outlaws, as the palefaces call us.”

He turned to his scanty band of men. None had moved.

“I am going to invite Cole to my *jacal*. Not let Cole track Loco like a rabbit. We will meet him in an open place…not in a wolf’s den.”

They nodded their heads in agreement, as if this was the most natural thing to do. Though they knew Cole would shoot Loco at sight. No word would escape Loco’s lips. Such was the code of the Apaches.

Before sunrise, one of his broncos would convey Loco’s invitation to Cole. The messenger would be a young bronco yet to attain manhood. At least, Cole would not kill him on sight.

It was late in the morning when the young bronco found Cole. He recognized him by his palomino. Cole was sleeping in the shade of a rock, a hat over his face.

“*Hola* brother Cole,” the young bronco greeted him. “Loco awaits Cole on the northern side of *Chug-de-Slona*-Old Centipede hills...”

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At that very moment, Cole stood viewing the valley from behind a clump of yucca and prickly pear. He had been watching an Apache camp for nearly an hour. Ascertaining if it belonged to Loco.

Early at sunrise, he had started on foot to avoid detection. Also, horseback travel here was impossible. This bunch seemed an innocent lot, but he stayed and waited and watched.

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The young bronco stood silently. Cole had not moved. He dared not to repeat and awaken him. Slowly, the resting man stirred, pushing the hat from his face. He smiled.

The bronco gasped. A bearded face appeared. No Apache ever kept facial hair.

Jusaz grinned, showing brown stained teeth. Around him the bronco saw figures appear....Mexicans *bandidos*—bandits. He turned around and ran. A dagger caught him near his spine. And he sprawled face down on the ground.

Jusaz walked to the bronco, placed his foot on the body and pulled out the dagger. He turned and looked around.“Put him to the *hermigo*.” He pointed to an anthill some distance away.

The half-dead bronco was placed on one mound. Jusaz watched as the tiny fire ants swarmed on the struggling Indian.

He then turned to his band and yelled. “You heard the place....you know it…but remember I want Loco alive…anyone who kills the pig, will be fed to the ants. Now let’s go...!”

The band rode out into the desert. Even as the blood red fire ants continued to swarm, sting and devour the hapless young Indian.

Cole continued his search. It seemed the God of the Sierra Madre was helping Loco. But today, whatever God came to protect Loco, it did not matter; he would find that *lagarto*—lizard.

There he met an Apache family. They gave him food and drink.

Jusaz and his band dismounted some distance from the Old Centipede hills. He sent a scout forward to study the layout.

Sometime later, the scout returned. Loco and his band were camping on an elevation. One side was flanked by broken hills, the other by a wooded area.

The Mexican bounty hunter split his band in two groups.

He sent the smaller group up the hills, behind the Apaches. The larger group was to attack from the woods.

The Apaches were caught unawares, and that surprised Jusaz. Apaches were a cautious lot. They never camped so carelessly in the open. They were masters of camouflage.

On the attack by the larger group, the Apaches scattered.

Within a short time, they were overpowered. As they were no match against the Mexicans' rifles and pistols. Their weapons were mainly ambush and stealth.

Jusaz strode into the Apache camp grinning. At least a dozen hostiles lay wounded or dead. The bounty hunter had lost some men. His pack began the gruesome task of killing and scalping the dead Indians.

Loco looked at him with unspeakable hatred.

“Do you know who brought me here?” Jusaz teased. “Your brother Cole!”

Loco looked at the bounty hunter and spat on the ground.

Jusaz simply laughed in answer; he had walked into a gold mine. “Bind him…let’s leave.” he ordered his band.

The man binding Loco was the first to fall. An arrow protruding from his chest.

Then the second fell. Another shaft of arrow sticking from his neck.

 Jusaz was quick to react. He leaped behind Loco pulling out a pistol.

Then the third, fourth and the fifth men dropped in the same manner.

Jusaz now stood alone but had cleverly used Loco to shield himself. He scanned the wooded area before him for the unseen killer. Beads of sweat appeared on his face.

 The killer was invisible, but Jusaz had a good idea of who it was.

 “Cole!” he called. “I... know... it is... you.” His voice wavered. All he saw was the silent woods looking back at him.

Again he tried, “Cole..! I know how much.... you need this man....alive...he has killed your whore...”

 Again, silence mocked him.

“Quit joking! You son of a bitch!” he tried again. “You may shoot me, but I’ll pull the trigger and blast this pig’s head like a pumpkin.” His eyes darted around as he spoke.

Slowly, he thumbed back the pistol’s hammer.

 An arrow whished through the air and pierced Loco’s belly. The Apache outlaw crumpled to the ground.

Jusaz’s eyes grew round like marbles. He crossed himself and yelled, “You Bastard...you son of a bitch...” Then began firing, panning the pistol all around him.

It went empty, and he flung it in the trees.“You son of a bitch...! Why don’t you come out and fight like a man...? Has sleeping with your whore made you soft...?” He looked around nervously.

 Right before him, Cole emerged. His face wooden. His bow empty.

8. Code Among the Apaches – Death Stings

 Jusaz saw him, saw his empty bow. With a furious roar, he rushed brandishing his saber. For a big man, he moved fast. He leapt at Cole, swinging the saber.

 Cole tried to ward it off with his bow, but the slender piece of wood was of no match against the saber. It sliced through it easily. Again, the saber cut savagely. He ducked underneath it.

 Compared to Cole, Jusaz was tall and a well-built man and he used all his strength behind the saber, swinging and cutting at the shorter man.

 This dangerous dance continued till the keen edge of the metallic saber caught the trunk of a tree. With another fierce roar, Jusaz freed the blade from the bark, only to scream in pain. The bounty hunter looked down in horror to find metal tearing through his body.

The moment of respite Cole had received from the onslaught was enough. He had driven the blade of the tomahawk into Jusaz. As the bounty hunter’s pain driven body tried to comprehend the situation, Cole drove it deeper.

 Jusaz’s eyes rolled downward to Cole’s face. Anger and hate on it.

Cole drove it further, slicing it upwards. Jusaz dropped the saber and his near lifeless body tried to grab on to Cole. The half-breed Indian stepped aside and let Jusaz fall. Rolling down the slope, he stopped halfway against a mound of dirt and stayed there.

Jusaz opened his eyes. The pain and defeat were too much for him. Revenge still remained in his heart. He could still see the back of the bastard Cole. With an effort, he reached for the dagger inside his coat. It was still sticky with the young bronco’s blood.

It was then he felt the first stings. “*Madre de Dios*—Mother of God…*Hermigo!*” He screamed as the little predators swarmed all over him.

He tried to tear the ants away, but it only grew worse. Soon, his struggles were to no avail.

He begged God to let death come swiftly...to...be merciful...but no mercy came. The ants kept climbing out of the mound and swamping him. Death never came swiftly from these insects.

Cole stood there, unaware of the drama behind him. Jusaz’s blood had stained his face. He tried to wipe it but only smeared it. Armed with a tomahawk, he moved towards Loco.

The Apache was kneeling, unsteadily. The arrow still protruding from his belly. Cole knew he had shot the arrow not to kill, only to maim...and maim painfully.

Loco caught sight of him. His brother looked like *El Diablo*—The Devil. Loco pushed his hand into his fawn skin coat and knew he had made a mistake. The tomahawk dug into his throat. With a gurgling sound, he fell to the ground. There, he struggled in his death spasms.

 Cole watched calmly till the body went still. Only then he was aware of the surroundings. His sights went to Loco’s clenched fist. It held something. He placed his foot on it and opened it. It contained a trinket. He recognized it. Lifting it, he put it in his pocket. He looked at his brother’s corpse.

*Why had you to do it, brother?* he mused. There had never been love between the two, only respect and mostly despair. He sat there beside his brother’s corpse till it was dark. Wrapping up the corpse, he put it over his shoulder and started walking.

Code Among the Apaches – The Heirloom

Loco’s death bought mourning but relief to the reservation. And it would continue for days. The Paleface guards were pleased too. They hinted of better rations on the reservations.

 It was nearing sunset when the last rites of Loco were over. The Apache burial ground wore a deserted look. Cole and Jubela were the last to leave.

Cole grasped his grandfather’s hand and led him away from the grave. A cool mournful breeze had blown from the desert. “*Abejo*,” he said. “I have something to give you.....something Loco gave me before he died…” He handed him the heirloom-the Eagle Clan.

Setting his eyes fixed on the old man, he continued, “If Loco had his heirloom and I have mine where did the third one come from?”

Cole threw the three heirlooms before the old man. His eyes were now two fiery pits. “Why did you do it Jubela?”

 The old man startled as if struck on hearing his grandson call him by his name...no *Abejo*.

 “I do not know of what you talk, Grandson.”

“You killed and dishonored my Isobella and planted the Eagle Clan to make me think Loco had done so…”

“Grandson, are you mad? Has the death of Loco made you lose your mind?” interrupted the old man.

But Cole continued, unperturbed. “Loco came to my adobe, but came in peace. And my mind clouded with grief and anger. I killed my innocent brother.”

 “Grandson, your speech is like a senile old woman!” Jubela shouted.

Cole remained silent, then turned around and headed for a copse of trees. A moment later, he dragged out a man whose face was covered.

Bending over, Cole uncovered the face. It was Captain Franklin.

The captain was badly roughed up. “Chief…I am sorry.” The frightened captain said, looking at Jubela. “I had no choice. I told him everything…”

The captain never got a chance to continue. The hilt of Jubela’s knife protruded from his neck. A surprised look came over his face. Blood gushed from his neck, as he coughed, more blood trickled from his mouth. He stumbled forward and fell.

Cole glowered at the old man.

“I had to do it,” muttered the old man. “If not, the complete Apache Eagle Clan race would be destroyed.”

“Jubela, you are worse than a coyote...sidewinder!,” spat Cole. “I wish I could kill you the way I killed Loco but if there is any Apache in you...you know what to do.”

He placed a pistol before the old man. “Jubela you know what to do...”

 The old man nodded, lifted the pistol and placed it to his own temple.

“Not here, Jubela this is sacred burial ground!”

“*Ussen*, be with you, grandson,” the old man said and walked towards the copse of trees.

 Cole walked towards Loco’s grave. The past events came to his mind…before dying, Loco had put his hand into his fawn skin coat. He meant to show Cole the heirloom, to prove his innocence. But Cole killed him.

With the possession of three heirlooms, Cole realized that there had been some foul play. The first suspect was the captain; he had sworn to destroy Cole. He could have easily killed Isobella and put the blame on Loco.

So before Loco’s last rites, he had confronted the captain. The man, a coward, confessed immediately. Though he had not committed the crime, he had been a part of it.Jubela had masterminded the plan all along, he further confessed.

It was Jubela who had set up Cole against Loco. It was he who had killed and humiliated Isobella, after death.

At first, it was hard to believe his grandfather was capable of such heinous acts. The old man felt no pity, even for his unborn great grandchild!

But when Cole went over the occurrences, it began to make sense. Only his grandfather could carve such a perfect heirloom, he was a master carver. Then came the killing of Isobella, it was done in such an authentic way that only a hand and mind of a true Apache could do it.

The captain also told him that Jubela had scornfully said that the army was of no match for Loco. The army’s strength was in numbers and in the open desert, numbers never stood a chance. Loco and his broncos would disappear like snakes under the sand.

Hunting down and killing Loco needed a small group. The smaller the better. The only people capable of killing Loco were Cole or himself, Jubela.

If it had been twenty years earlier, Jubela had proudly boasted, he would have tried it. Even now it was possible, but he could not risk it. He was needed by his people. Cole, he said, was dispensable; the half-breed had thrown away his life for a mere Mexican girl.

Cole remembered that Jubela was not happy with his decision to leave the tribe and settle in a white man’s way of life. He believed Cole should have stayed back and cared for the people. He should have become the next chief and taught the young broncos the Apache way of life. Jubela had no hope in Loco.

Even that had been forgiven by the old man. The real disappointment came when he married Isobella. The old man never approved of Isobella as she was Mexican. He believed Cole should have taken a full bloodied Apache squaw for a wife. So that he could sire a child having a thorough Apache blood than the diluted blood of a Mexican. It was too much for the old man. For a year or two, he did not speak to Cole.

Jubela knew the only solution to eliminate Loco was Cole. He knew Cole would not go after Loco, for he abided by the Apache code. It meant he would not kill another Apache without sufficient reason. So Jubela had to give him a reason. He knew he could not openly do it, not without meeting the ire of his people. So, he had been thinking on these lines for a while.

He had first outlined it to the captain the day he was informed of Loco’s attack on El Stringo. Also, he knew the idiotic captain was the perfect man to fit the bill. And just as he had reckoned, the witless captain agreed. He had also started to fashion the heirloom on that day, too.

First, he advised the captain to meet Cole; he knew the uncouth captain would somehow rile Cole. And then to spread the news that Cole had agreed to kill Loco.

This news would flush Loco out of his burrow. The fear and respect for Cole had prompted Loco to make peace. From then on, Jubela would come into play.

So Loco had come to Cole’s adobe, along with his renegade broncos. But on that fateful day, Isobella was alone. Not knowing Loco’s intention and the inbred fear of Apache caused her to swoon.

Loco decided to look after Isobella as they waited for Cole’s return.

The Tarahumara Indian, Wari, hurried to the reservation to tell Jubela the news of Loco’s arrival. On receiving the news, he purposefully sent Wari to find Cole. But rode to the adobe by himself: a deceitful job to complete which needed no witness.

At the adobe, he met Loco. He mocked him, saying that he would send Cole after him. This hurt Loco’s pride and he immediately left.

Thereafter, the old man killed Isobella.

He had been humane by killing her first and then performing the many mutilations. Making it looked like Loco’s work. After all, Loco had a wretched reputation.

Unfortunately, Wari happened to return to the adobe and caught Jubela in the act. He was aghast and hurried to tell Cole. The old man could not afford to leave Wari alive and killed him. But as punishment, had performed the mutilations while the Tarahumara was alive.

 He then planted the third heirloom in Wari’s fist as evidence.

After the job, Jubela returned to the reservation. And thus he had accomplished his endeavor.

Loco had a faint idea about it. But he chose the Apache code rather than complain to Cole like a weakling.

 If Cole had insight and believed in Loco’s code, he would have found the truth rather than go on the hunt. But the truth was he believed his grandfather above everything else and now he had paid the price. He had lost his brother, his woman, and his unborn child.

The sound of a bullet jarred him from his thoughts. Now he had lost his grandfather, too. When would this bloodshed stop? Everything was over, but there was still one thing to do.

He walked to his brother’s grave and knelt beside it.

The western skies were shrouding the earth in the deep hues of dark orange. He removed his pistol. “May the Man On the Cross help me...and *Ussen* forgive me for my sins”

A loud bullet shot shattered the silent evening.

The people from the reservation timidly began to gather. Being superstitious, the tribe avoided visits to the burial grounds at night.

Cole lay face down across his brother’s grave, pistol in his hand. The right side of his head to his shoulder was slick with blood. Nobody could survive such a close shot.

“He could not bear the death of his brother.” They began whispering and shaking their heads.

A low but mournful cries pierced the silent night air. The gathered crowd began to lament..

The gathered crowd parted to give way to the old man, Jubela. The *Abejo* came and stopped before Cole’s limp body. His heart sincerely wept, but his mind was thinking.

In this changing world, values change. What good does it make if values are preserved and people are not there to follow them? He had to preserve the proud Apache race; it was his duty. And for that, sacrifices had to be made. Also, someone was to lead the change in values. His grandsons had been brought up well. So he had done this.

He had also made it look like he had shot himself, for Cole would not kill him. And in anger, he would turn himself into another Loco. Then what? He knew with the guilt Cole would kill himself. He had taught them too well the code among the Apaches. The next generation he would teach would be different.

The people there pitied him. He lost two generations of sons.

Suddenly, a volley of shots gun exploded Jubela’s chest. He went down instantly, writhing in agony.

The gathered crowd gasped and involuntary backed away. Laying on his back, still on his brother’s grave, was Cole. The smoking pistol in his hand.

Without haste, he arose to his feet. This again was answered with a gasp of fear from the gathering.

Towering over the wounded old man, he addressed the whimpering crowd, “Apache Brethren Cole is no spirit! Cole would have gone into the Land of our Forefathers if not for Loco Chita…He heals me tells me to go back to the Land of the Living.”Wiping away the smear of blood from his temple, he exposed it to the gathering.

*Under the thick smear of blood, there was no bullet hole!* *Not even a cut or a skin break! It seemed like the wound had healed back again!* *It was impossible to bleed so much without a wound!*

“Loco Chita also told me not to trust this old sidewinder!” He gestured to the injured Jubela at his feet. “Loco’s spirit orders me to kill Jubela the first thing I enter the Land of the Living,

Jubela, made me kill my brother without proper reason. He killed my squaw and Wari in the most dishonorable way. Loco tells me he did not follow the code of the Apache truthfully. He tells me he is unfit to lead the Apache. Loco tells me his spirit lives in me and together we will guide the Apache to a great future!”

The gathering applauded Cole and Loco.

Jubela lay there, barely conscious. The two bullet holes in his chest had spurted out a lot of blood.

“Old man,” Cole bent over and whispered to him, “Take this,” he handed him his pistol, “Follow the code! An eye for an eye and a life for a life. Redeem yourself! For Loco, for Wari, for Isobella, for the brethren!”

Jubela’s eyes weakly fluttered open. He sought a glance at Cole, then at the pistol.

Wordlessly, he placed the muzzle in his mouth and pulled the trigger.

Instantly, the festivities ended. The gathering began lining up to pay their last respect to the great chieftain.

Cole rested back his weary body. An enormous duty lay ahead of him. A duty that he had self-imposed. Everything he had told his tribesmen was untrue. Neither did he shoot himself or encounter Loco’s spirit.

Just as he was about to shoot himself, a thought occurred to him. Jubela was crafty as a coyote. The old chieftain’s passion to lead his tribe was strong enough to break the code of the tribe. Turn brother against brother, spill innocent blood. Some strange sense warned him that old man would not kill himself. He felt terribly cheated. After all, he had lost a brother, a loving wife and a loyal friend. The old coyote had to pay. He could not openly accuse the old man. Not a veteran who had led the tribesmen of over fifty years. He had to trick him with his own guile.

So Cole had gone back to his brother’s grave and shot himself. Not in the head, but in the arm. The spilled blood he amply smeared on his temple. And he lay there waiting for the people to arrive. Knowing the highly superstitious nature of the people, he told them the tale. And they accepted it.

Now it was his turn to lead the people to a better future.

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Thanks for reading my book. Greatly appreciate it! I feel these stories are good, but your verdict about them matters the most. Be it good or bad, please give your unbiased views through any of the channels given below. Also, there is a list of my upcoming books with brief excerpts.

About the author:

Joseph Martin is a veteran in fiction writing. He has been writing short stories for the past twenty-five years. What started as a hobby turned into a passion.

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Joseph teaches English, Math and Science. He is also an ichthyologist and a part-time movie critic. His other interests are cricket, reading and trekking.

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The Man-Eating Hooved Brigands. (Sample Excerpt)

Mount Makuk-Along the Iraq-Iran border.

*A flesh-eating ungulate!* Zeid Berzinji scoffed at the thought.

His uncle had definitely said *Paha-jdin*, which roughly translated to a flesh eating hoofed animal in ancient Kurdish language.

Zeid just as much believed in it as he believed in the desert: *Djinn* or *Shayatan*-demon or devils. These *Djinns* were rumored to feed on human flesh, especially rotten flesh and bones. The only *djinns* of the times were Saddam Hussein’s Baath Party and the Zionists. He was an Iraqi Kurd, studying at the prestigious College of the Medicine University of Baghdad, formerly known as the Iraqi Royal Medical College. He being a student of medicine, this wacky tale would not put him off.

But he kept his thoughts to himself for the fear of offending his Grand-uncle, Rustom Qazzaz. The patriarch was not the one to be ridiculed. If he said the *Paha-jdin* existed, then no person on earth could change his mind.

Besides, Zeid owed his life to the old man. His parents were freedom fighters and were killed in the Kurdish revolution. It was then his old uncle set him up in a respectable orphanage in the Iraqi city of Baghdad to study.

Uncle Qazzaz had explained that he never believed in the *Paha-jdin*.

It remained so until bad times befell on him. One of Uncle’s associates advised him to visit the *Paha-jdin*and offer a sacrifice. It was simple; all the uncle had to do was go to the spot, tie the sacrifice and leave. Fortune would follow.

The associate guided the uncle to the location and there he offered a sacrificial lamb. The effect was quick; uncle’s next business trip was a success. And it continued.

In the beginning, Uncle Qazzaz took it as a coincidence. With time, he forgot all about it. But once again, bad times returned. Once on a trip to Iran, he had to pass this way when the memory of the *Paha-jdin* returned. Though not willing to do so, he persuaded himself. Barely a week passed and success returned. But now it came in spurts and jerks. So now he planned on a special sacrifice on this trip.

Zeid and his grand-uncle was on a business trip to Iran. He believed the trip was a complete waste of time. But it was his uncle’s idea for Zeid to accompany him on the trip. His uncle believed that the younger generation was not brought up the right way. Their whole life, they spent with their nose stuck in books. It was time they got enrich with nature.

They traveled in uncle’s Land Rover from the city of As Sulaymaniyah in Kurdistan, then to Mahabad-a border town and the old capital of Kurdistan.

It was here that Uncle Qazzaz’s eccentricities began. At the last village, just before the tortuous journey up to the mountains, his uncle had purchased a lamb. A sacrificial lamb.

Then began his rambling, “If you offer the *Paha-jdin* a sheep or a lamb, you are guaranteed a safe journey through their territory. Besides, there will be a spell of good luck in your venture! The bigger the offering, the better! If you offer your own child or even your own kin, it’s the best!”

In the beginning, Zeid had paid little attention to him. But as the evening grew, he realized his uncle meant to visit these mythical creatures.

Just after sunset, Uncle Qazzaz parked the Land Rover under a rocky outcrop. He led Zeid up a rocky path, lighting the path with an electric torch, pulling along the lamb. Besides this, he also carried a long and heavy wooden staff. Zeid was puzzled; he had never seen him carry one.

The path they took up was rocky and uneven. It twisted and turned with sheer drops on one side. This dangerous and tiresome climb continued until they reached an extensive plateau. It was well into the night.

Handing Zeid the torch and the lamb’s leash, Uncle Qazzaz went ahead with his staff. All this was seeming mindless to Zeid. And he could do without this camel’s crap. He tried to get his uncle’s attention, but the old man continued as if hypnotized.

Uninterested, Zeid straggled behind, pulling the lamb with him. The air on the plateau was thin and chilly. He felt thankful that he had brought along his sweater. The sky was of a dark inky tinge with the scattering of stars. And the ground was rocky and hard, with very sparse grass. He was glad he had worn his sport shoes. The entire place looked alien to him and he was completely disoriented. Without his uncle, he would never know the way down the plateau.

Soon they entered a broad gully with low and stony hillocks on either side. Zeid was now getting worried he had to stop his uncle’s eccentricities. Abruptly, the old man stopped before a stand of poplars. He stood watching them.

Then, without a warning he knelt, raised up his arms with the staff higher. In a loud voice, he called in Kurdish, “O Hunters of the Night! I beseech you to accept my sacrifice and bring me fortune!”

Zeid was startled by the burst of silence. His uncle’s voice rang with a hollow echo amidst the hillocks.

Zeid looked about to see if it had triggered an avalanche. Then he looked at his uncle.

The old man’s stance had not changed. It reminded him of a biblical scene. Uncle was still rambling in the ancient tongue, much of which Zeid did not understand.

All this was seeming too farfetched. He decided to end it, even carry uncle, bodily away. Though he knew he was no match for uncle. The patriarch, old as he was, had a better physique than the

scrawny Zeid. So much so that uncle was planning to marry a girl as young as Zeid. If it happened, she would be uncle’s eighth wife.

Just as he began towards his uncle, he heard sounds from the top of the hillocks. Not loud ones, muted sounds, like deer or cattle moving steadily on solid rock. Only these sounds seemed to be made by heavier, clumsier animals.

Zeid stopped and listened. Moments later, nothing happened. All the while, he had a prickly feeling that they were being watched. Though he scoured the hillocks and poplar trees, he could see nothing. As if to support his doubt, the otherwise silent lamb they had brought along started bleating.

Then again, the sound occurred. This time with a light rattle of sliding pebbles. He swore and swung the light beam in the direction. This instant, he was in time to see several dark, hunched shapes disappear.

*Did the Paha-jdin really exist? How was it possible?* He had never known anything to exist, even remotely possibly? For the first time, Zeid felt fear grip him.

He looked at his uncle. The old man had not moved. “Uncle Qazzaz!” He called urgently and hurried beside him, pulling along the bleating lamb. “Let’s get away from here!”

Uncle was still kneeling, watching the swaying poplars with fear as if they would transform themselves into the mythical being. The poplars were blending in the shadows, creating an eerie feeling.

Zeid, now realized why, from amidst them, a rasping humanoid sound was emitting. He flashed the torchlight in the poplars and the rasping stopped.

Grabbing his uncle’s arm, he tried to yank him to his feet.

The old man fiercely resisted. “Zeid, tie the lamb to a trunk!”

Zeid stared incredulously at his uncle. It convinced him the man had gone insane. Whatever was out there, he had to save him from it. “No…no you can’t stay here!” He shouted.

“No one is keeping me away from my fortune!” The old man gritted angrily. “Especially not you!”

It was no use arguing with an insane man. Zeid used all his strength and yanked the old man to his feet. Grabbing him by his arm, he made for the entrance of the gully. Once again, he found resistance. He turned.

To his surprise, he found his uncle grinning in an insane manner.

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“What’s your hurry, boy? I’m going, but you are staying!”

“Uncle, there is no time…”

“Shut up, boy! Don’t you know who is the special sacrifice?”

Before Zeid could react, he saw in a blur. His uncle’s heavy staff was crashing down on him.

The Unholy Redemption (Sample Excerpt)

After the first time, Tanaa not aware of how many times the subhuman had entered her.

She wasaware of the caressing, the petting, the terrible was pain and the wet, cold tarmac.

*That was good,* he thought as he stood and pulled up his pants. *She had been so sweet… so cute… so soft yet so firm,* *just like a damsel;* he mused as he lovingly gazed at her form lying at his feet.

 It would be a pity to kill her. He wished he could *use* this *damsel* again and again. But he knew the police would come hunting for her. He had to move fast. Get rid of all the evidence. There was also the damsel’s male companion of whom he had to get rid of.

Stooping down, he lifted her unconscious form. Put it over his shoulder, walking towards her companion. He would dispose of the bodies, the same way he always did. They would become leopard food somewhere down in the jungle.

He identified himself with the leopard using the beast’s modus operandi, to-stalk and prey. Like the leopard, he was in element with the darkness. He had spent a good bit of his life in semi- darkness. This gave him a chance to pick and choose his prey. He saw himself as a predator, like to call himself the same-*The Predator*.

Only certain prey excited him, like the *damsel* that he had taken just now. When it did, he went after them like a bull elephant in season. Despite a few deformities, he managed to cope up well. It was because of these deformities he never liked to venture out in the day.

But tonight, a few hours ago, the Predator had been livid with himself. His prey-the *damsel* had disappeared. For two days, he had marked the *damsel*, carefully stalking her. And then, without raising an alarm, she was gone…

*Three days ago, during the handicraft fair in Shridara the Predator had seen the woman-damsel as he named her. The woman’s sparkling black eyes, flawless smooth skin and waist long hair had caught his fancy. And instantly, he chose her. They were a young couple, but the guy was inconsequential in his plans. When the time would come to take her, the guy would be squashed like an insect.*

*The next evening, when he had caught sight of the couple, his eyes were only on her. The damsel had worn a deep red sari and bedecked herself with gold jewelry. He instantly felt a stirring in his loins. A definite sign that the beast had targeted its prey.*

*He had followed them in a guise of a beggar. His excitement heightened as he smelled the scent of juhi flowers in her hair. A trail the damsel had left behind. It almost beckoned him towards her. He had felt powerful, like the leopard going after its prey.*

*They aimlessly loitered in the handicraft fair. Hand in hand, eyes locked with each other.*

*They were undoubtedly a married honeymooning couple; he had assumed.*

*The next day too in the evening he had trailed them. This time too the damsel looked beautiful in a pink salwar-kameez. He admired her slim figure that it emphasized.*

*That day too, the damsel had worn flowers in her hair, but was of a different type. It could be jasmine. He**could not tell, for he had to remain far back as she grew wary.*

*Throughout the handicraft fair, he followed them. Completely clueless of what he intended to do. He had just felt like getting close to her. So close that he could actually smell her perfume. Caress her too.*

*But he had done nothing. Just trailed them at a respectful distance.*

*Even the leopard stayed back when its prey grew wary. When his desires grew unbearable, then a plan would unfold in his mind. It always worked in this way. Reaping much richer rewards than simply caressing her. Until then, he would trail her like a love-struck teenager.*

*On the second night he had crouched feline like, watching her through the shrubbery in a heavy downpour. The damsel was up with her husband in the hotel balcony.*

*Suddenly, the damsel had looked exactly at the spot where he was lying. And abruptly turned away. It thrilled him. He felt they had made eye contact. But in his heart, he knew it was not true. He was well hidden in the shrubbery like the leopard. It was dark and raining.*

*To watch her closer, he had climbed the drainage pipe up to her room, just like the leopard. There he spied on her. He would have continued to do so if her husband had not begun to search the place. He had climbed down and disappeared into the welcoming darkness of the woodlands.*

*But the next evening, on returning, he found the couple had checked out. It was the first time he had lost his prey. Furious and dejected, he had returned to the dark haven of his woodlands.*

But fortune seemed to smile on him. He had come across their car wreckage in the woodlands. From there, it was fairly simple. He just had to enact the leopard stalking its prey till their nerves got frayed. The prey would snap at a mere snap of the fingers.

Even now, as he carried her, he could feel her soft and warm body against his. He could smell the *jasmine* scent still fresh in her hair. All this excited him.

Mumbai’s Midnight Maidens (Sample Excerpt)

The patron sat in complete darkness, in obscurity. Watching the two artiste perform on the bed.

Anonymity had always been his allay. So obsessed he was with it, he secretly called himself Phantom.

The half-naked woman on the bed reminded him of his *bathing woman*.

It had happened years ago... but her memory still burned in his mind. So every year, he hired a couple to perform sex in her memory. Selecting a woman that resembled his *bathing woman*.

 “Stop!” the patron shouted, anger in his voice. Even hate. “Get out!” He ordered the male artiste. Unable to bear the sight of another man atop his slut.

The actress sat up, alert, startled, naked to her waist. Fear in her eyes. Her breasts swayed gently. Beautiful and firm.

The patron had eyes only for it. He loved it-the fear in her eyes and her breasts. His *bathing woman* was afraid of him. Revenge, for just the way she had scarred him, humiliated him, and burned him. His wrist still held the scar.

He moved closer to the female artiste, undaunted by the bright light. The light meant to keep him invisible. His identity and enormity.

She gasped at his identity. *Nobody would believe this man was her patron!*

But all the patron could see was his *bathing woman* sitting on the mattress naked to the waist. Insulting him, scorning him.

*So she wanted a good fuck*! He was no longer a child. The patron loomed over her, smiling yet more of a grimace. It frightened her.

He made her stand up. She tried to look coquettish but could not mask her fear. Her patrons' hand was fondling her breast. Then his lips were to it. Sucking. Pulling, nibbling at each nipple.

His hand dropped further, pulling down her skirt. She stood there in her panties. He slipped his hand into it. Feeling the soft bush moving downwards. He felt her relax.

All that her patron wanted was sex, she thought. She had no qualms. He would have to pay extra. She was called along with her male partner to put on a performance.

He pulled down her panties and eyed her. She was no amateur in her business, but she felt ashamed, defiled as he watched her. It unnerved her.

Slowly, he turned her around. *Was he going to sodomize?*

She thought with dismay. She hated men who did the anal way. He lay her on the bed prone. Mounting her. She raised her rump to assist him.

He entered her doggy-style. His *bathing woman* wanted him to fornicate like an animal. So he would do it like she wanted.

At that instant his mind went back to that fateful noon with his *bathing woman.*

*After long moments of foreplay, he was ready to enter her. And just as he was ready to release, she realized and shoved him away. He resisted, trying to come into her. He could not waste it.*

*Someone had told him that man’s juices were valuable. Every drop of semen consisted of sixty drops of blood.*

*With a mighty push, she detached him from her and his valuable white liquid shot all over the coverlet and mattress.*

*He was enraged. How dare she waste his strength? He looked up. She seemed even more enraged.*

*She began abusing him again, using male abuses. Filthy ones.*

*In a sudden fit of fury, he threatened her. He would tell the villagers she was a whore. A slut. Anybody could screw her like a sow. In a jiffy she screamed, raising an alarm. She grabbed a smoldering wooden stick and jabbed it into his wrist.*

*With a sudden burst of strength, he pushed her and ran for the door. Passerbys caught him and she charged him with theft and inappropriate touching.*

*The public began trashing him and all he could think about that wretched noon was how he would do her doggy-style while he killed her...*

The patron reached his climax and rested his sweaty head on the artiste's back. Slowly, he dismounted. She lay there, unmoving. He quickly dressed up and smoked. She had not moved yet.

He softly walked to her. She was looking at him wide eyed. Unblinking. Her face was frozen in a mask of pain and terror.

He lightly tapped on her face. Her head hung limply. She had been dead for some time. But how? He was confused.

Nonsense Bollywood Masala (Sample Excerpt)

The climate over the village of Sholaypuri was a typical summer day. It was called so after the terribly spicy cholepuri, the local dish, the village prepared. Blue cloudless skies, hot bright sun, birds singing in the trees and a pristine river flowing through lush green forest. In the village, the folks, industrious guys, worked hard or hardly worked for their livelihood.

They were so backward that an electric bulb had not reached their village. So all their chores they had to finish while there was sunlight. The village weaver was working hard on his electric loom, the potter on his battery operated wheel, the lumber-jack with his electric saw and the carpenter with his electric drill. The ‘poor’ folk’s only entertainment was watching television after sunset! *So much for the bulbless land*!

Another important amenity they lacked was a regular supply of water. Though they possessed a functional electric tube-well, they got their water from the river. They had seen on television how village women-folk carried vessels of water on their hips and heads and, since they lived in a village, decided to emulate them.

They followed a strict decorum for bathing. First the women bathed, then the men, so that the latter could watch and then wash. Lastly came the *any other* type, these could play their quirky games of *dropping and picking the soap* and have their fun keeping the village free of contamination.

But such an idyllic place had their nemesis, too.

On that particular morning a bevy of maidens were washing and bathing in the river. Each lamenting or gloating how they would con their future husbands to get them a plasma screen television or maybe a microwave. They were still at it when they heard the alarm sound.

“The bandit Jabber Ring is coming! Hurry! Hurry!” screamed the shepherd boy at the top of his lungs as he tore down the hill. It was the boy’s job to alert the village. The boy did not herd sheep but was dressed like one as in the movies.

The bandit Jabber Ring terrorized the villages in the area. His prime terror weapon was his constant brainwashing jabbering. He methodically raided village after village, giving each village enough time to recuperate.

The women craned their necks to watch.

High on the ridge, a group of horsemen rode wildly down towards the village. They were a ferocious lot, ragged and unkempt, armed with rifles and a bandolier of bullets. Leading them was the dreaded Jabber Ring; everybody could recognize him from afar.

“Hey *ma*!” cried Hema, the t*angawal*i, the girl who drove the horse cart.

“Shouldn’t we hide?”

“Chill, he is not interested in us. Blah blah blah blah…” said Kitkit the village’s pundit’s wife. She, being the village ‘pundit’s wife, spoke too much. Pun intended.

“Stop jabbering!” cut in Goongi the village’s spokesman’s wife.

“How can I stop Jabber Ring? I am just a pretty, petite woman, after all!” complained Kitkit.

In time, the bandit and his men arrived, but looked the other way as they rode towards the village.

“Fools, sissy, soft on, castrated cocks, emasculated men…” the women taunted, for they loved jabbering.

 Preparations began in the village. The owner of the house in the foremost sighed and sent his son to call the village mason. The village mason knew the routine; he began to mix the cement. Temporary stalls of KFC and McDonald was erected. Folks stopped their work and silently came out; they would not be able to work for the rest of the day.

They looked towards the village chief’s house, but to their surprise, they saw the chief’s old manservant emerge, Ramlal Vikas. He walked with a swank and gestured to the mobile he had to his ear-*the chief is in contact with me.*

Jabber Ring and his men reached the entrance. The men dismounted and hurried to the food stalls.

“Sons of a swine!” he roared, “who will get me down, your father!”

A few stray piglets rushed out of the field and looked fondly at him.

Two of the men hurried and lifted him off his mount while others continued purchasing refreshments.

On the ground, his head barely reached the horse’s belly, his legs below his knees were missing. One of his men, Kalia, carried the bandit on his shoulders. Nudging his carrier by a spur at each stump, the bandit slowly looked around.

He then bellowed loudly, “Village folks, peep from your respective houses and listen to me!”

A voice from behind a closed door inquired, “What if we are not in our own house? Should we still listen?”

Before he could continue, Ramlal interrupted, “Why should we peep and listen? We shall all assemble and hear your talks.”

He gave a loud clap, and a tempo arrived. Printed on its side was PK GIRJA COMPANY - PARTY ORGANIZERS.

Workmen hauled out from the tempo chairs and arranged them. Quickly a *shamania* was erected. The village folk began to trickle in.

The bandit nudged his carrier so as he made him move to and fro in an agitated manner. *Nobody took a bandit seriously now days!*

When everyone had settled down, the bandit boomed, “Sophisticated *junglees,* when I ask you for a little ration, I'm just being rational! I’m telling you I don’t do any injustice!”

He pulled a hair nose and winced. Once more, he looked at the congregation and bellowed. “Do you know the amount of reward the government has put on me?”

They looked at him blindly. *Ignorant Fools!* He scoffed.

They continued to look at him and then he was in a soup.*What was the figure?* He asked himself. *Where was the darn Samba when you needed him!*

Samba was his man-Friday. He also had a man-Saturday but no man-Sunday because on Sunday he rested. Also, he trusted Samba the most.

Once more he bellowed, “My dear chap Samba, just tell these dummies how much reward the government has put on my head?”

Samba dropped his momos and the news-paper he was reading, cursed and hurried.

He looked at his proud master and then at the people. He could not break his master’s heart. Very proudly and loudly, Samba declared, “Two lakhs Iranian rials!”

There was an audible sound of shock from the crowd.

“Do you know why two lakh?” The bandit took center stage again, “Because two lakh lakh miles from here when a child cries, the mother says go to sleep, go to sleep or Jabber Ring will come!”

In an Iranian village, Chabahar of The Islamic Republic of Iran, a four-month infant lay crying. Suddenly he stopped, climbed to the window, watched for some time. “Oh, no!” the infant whispered, “Jabber Ring!” Quickly it closed its eyes and went to sleep.

“Why Iranian rials? Why not Indian rupees?” asked the puzzled Ramlal. Having a Ph.D in Economics, he knew the value of an Indian rupee to an Iranian rial was 1: 503. This meant the reward would barely total upto Rs 400! He earned more than Rs 18000 per month being a manservant to the Headman.

“Stupid ignorant people!” screamed the bandit, “Rials because they have a higher value than rupees! Even dollars! Stupid swines! Do you know that one *Omani rial* is equal to 2.60 US dollars?”

Omani rial? Ramlal did his math. For the first time, he had to agree that the bandit was right.

Now that he had everyone’s attention, he dropped the bomb. “Now, where is my ration?”

The bandit gave out a throaty laugh. “Ok no rations, eh! Where are my arms? Eh, arms like alms! arms got it!” He gave another throaty laugh.

The men quickly hid their arms behind their shawls. And the women looked at each other with concern.

Jabber rolled with laughter. “I mean, weapons, arms”

At this, he saw a rider coming in full gallop. It was the village chief, Thakur. Also known as the armless horseman.

The Yellow Noose (Sample Excerpt)

The debauchery of looting and slaughtering the rich *sethji* – merchant with his wife, three children and two *Khidmatgars* or butlers was complete by the wee hours of the night.

He and his family were carrying a bounty of precious gems, jewelry and expensive silk.

It was more than the theives had expected. They were overjoyed. The Goddess was pleased with them. But they could not wait to gloat over it. The night was growing deeper. They needed to hurry to avoid being caught and also to let the Goddess do her disposal task of the corpses.

Leaving the corpses in the open, the marauders hastily fled the scene.

An hour or so of travel, they settled down for the night and also to distribute their ill-gotten wealth.

Stealthing away from the eyes of the elders, a novice slipped away from the group. Quickly retracing his steps back to the scene of the carnage.

Unfortunately, while doing the grisly act earlier, he had lost his necklet. Though not of much value, it held sentimental value. It was a gift from his beloved. He could not bear to part with it. Forbidden or not, he was going to retrieve it.

As he neared the rendezvous, he sensed some movement. Intrigued, he stole closer, dropping to the ground. Now he could hear sounds. The ripping of flesh from the bone followed by the crunching of bones.

It reminded him of sounds made when carnivores feed.

A hyena or leopard had discovered the corpses. It would be dangerous to go out in the clearing. He would either have to return or wait out till the predator left. He decided on the latter

As he lay low, waiting, a peculiar sound shocked him. In between the ripping and crunching sounds was a giggle. It sounded feminine, but harsher. Accompanying it was a loud guttural sound that seemed to be human chanting.

Unable to surpass his curiosity, he climbed on his fours and watched. In the deep inky darkness and swirling mist, he could barely discern the scene ahead.

Slowly, out of the darkness and mist, a figure rose before him. It was a head and shoulder taller than the tallest man. *And to his surprise, it moved around like a human!*

It moved from corpse to corpse, stomping all over the carcasses. It appeared to be human, only monstrously tall. As it continued to stomp, the youth could sense a rhythm in the steps.

It was doing a *taandav*-a dance of fury. A task capable only by humans. Yet he had never seen or heard of such a creature before. Transfixed with the sight before he discerned another fact. The thing had a highly curvaceous figure.

*The monstrosity was a female!*

Engrossed in its *taandav* the being moved into the moonlight. The sight froze the man’s blood in the veins.

The being was female with a bluish -black body. Its head has a large profuse of long scraggly black hair. The face comprised of two large luminous eyes, an abnormally elongated bloody red tongue hung perpetually out and from the upper jaw jutted a pair of canines that were longer than any big cats.

Two pairs of arms emerged from the upper torso. One held a curved cutting weapon. The second and third arm held freshly decapitated heads by the tuff of its hair. The fourth held a vessel which collected the freshly drained blood. This scarlet liquid she sipped frequently to refresh herself in her tiresome dance.

 Completely naked, if not for her adornments. Her upper torso was covered with garlands of human skulls and freshly decapitated heads. While the lower part was hidden by a skirt of human limbs.

Every time she vigorously spun in the dance; her long hair wildly whipped around, along with her skirt of limbs. All this made a terrifying picture to a mere mortal.

After a hard stretch of dancing, the being settled down. Slowly beginning to devour the corpses. Filling the silent night once with the harsh sounds of crunching and ripping of bones and flesh.

As he watched, it dawned to him; he was witnessing a horrifying celestial being…like his *revered deity*!

All the lore of the Goddess came to his mind. Every single word retold by the elders. The mother always was found in crematoriums, graveyards, famines, accidents sites.

First, the description of their deity matched this being in almost all the ways.

The next sentence came to mind…*The Goddess also promised her descendants that she would aid them in disposing of the corpses they left behind.* He now realized how the *Maa* disposed of the corpses. She devoured them with her voracious appetite, leaving no sign behind.

 The remembrance of the next few sentences caused him nearly to wet himself…

*With only a sole, promise attached to it. Once they had slaughtered the victims, they were forbidden to turn and watch. Also, they were not supposed to return for a day or two to the site of the slaughter.*

And he had just done that!

While she ate contentedly on her grisly meal, he slipped his trembling body backwards, the necklet forgotten. Now it was a matter oflife and death. *His!*

As he continued his slow calculated downward slid, his leg snagged into the nearby brush.

Releasing it caused a miniature avalanche of dirt.

The sharp hearing of the being picked up the disturbance it stopped in its feast. An angry tremble ran through the being’s body. It stood up in its towering stature, ready to inflict punishment on the meddler.

The youth untangled himself from the brush, rose and ran.

Behind him, the most fearsome, inhuman roar echoed through the wilderness. It sounded a mixture of fury and anguish.

Apache Gold (Sample Excerpt)

The playful skipping of the kid, Jemez, did not go unnoticed by Tokala. From his hawkish sight, nothing went a missing. Every scouting Indian’s sight was on par with the white men’s field glasses. To him, the kid was nothing less than a rabbit or squirrel. Something meant to be preyed upon. And he reckoned to do so.

And Jemez never missed a chance to slip through a visit to the buffalo cemetery. Ducking under the broken fence, he raised his hand habitually to prevent his *sombrero*- broad brimmed felt or straw hat from knocking off. It made him groan inwardly. He had left without it. A severe scolding would be awaiting him at home.

Lost in thought, he ran towards the bluff, instinct and familiarity of the region guiding him. But his joy was cut short. High up in the rocks, a rider appeared. The sight immobilized the child. Atop a war pony rode an Indian, staying statue-like. To every Mexican, an Indian was a mortal enemy. Every child had been instilled with this knowledge since infancy. Then later, the lesson of differentiation between a good and a bad Indian would be instructed. He had seen a number of Indians at different times in the marketplace, Navajo, Hopi, the peaceful ones. But this Indian radiated enough hatred and fear for the boy to sense.

Then his education kicked in. *Facing him was a* ***malo****-bad Indian!* This Indian, though diminutive, was frightfully colorfully painted, even his pony. Indians painted themselves only before a war. And an Indian war meant big trouble. In this complete territory, the surroundings were suffering from this scourge. A dreaded Apache war chief, Ujarak was supposed to be the troublemaker he had heard his *padre-father* say.

The war-paint on the Indian ranged from red to black to ocher. A headband decorated his head, adorned with an eagle’s feather. Thick black hair tumbled from under it up to his naked chest. His facial features and his chest was shrouded in war-paint. Slung on his shoulder was every Indian’s favorite weapon bow and arrows. The Indian sat bareback on his pony, rein in one hand and rifle in the other.

The scene made a pretty yet frightening picture. A colorful rider against a cloudless blue sky among the various green hues of the chaparral and the tawny sprawling desert soil.

A shrilling whoop shattered Jemez’s immobility. He saw in fear the colorful figure furiously ride down the incline, long black hair billowing directly towards the kid. It appeared as if the very *diablo-*devil was descending. Fear ordered the kid’s muscles to flee. With a scream of fear, Jemez turned and ran.

The kid’s short legs were no match for the powerful muscles of the pony. And he could hear the sound of the hooves coming closer. Jemez’s eyes hopefully sought his homestead. But to his disappointment, it appeared miles away. He scarcely cast his sight behind to realize within a lope or two the *Diablo* would grind him under his hooves. Running was no longer an option. He had to get off the trodden path, lose himself in the thicket ahead. Reach his homestead and let his family deal with the *Diablo*.

A good few yards away on the shoulder of the road, the chaparral grew dense. If he could reach it safely, he knew he had a chance. He shifted his direction just slightly. This shift in direction did not go unnoticed by the experienced scout. The *nino bobo*- small fool was trying to make him foolish. Once in the chaparral, the *nino* could disappear. Finding him would not be impossible, but it would be time-consuming. Ujarakand his pack were eagerly waiting in the mountains. A raid was a pleasant leisure.

Tokala drove his pony harder. Even before the kid could reach his spot, the mounted Indian was over him. In an effortless movement, he bent over the side of the pony and grabbed the kid.

Tokala lifted the screaming, squirming bundle in the air. Pulled the pony to a halt and slammed the kid against the back of the beast’s neck. The slam brought a stillness to the boy, although his body continued to tremble. Silent tears continued to flow. In rapid border Spanish, he began to recite a message. *Tell* *Alejandro Chief Ujarak coming.* He repeated it. Once. Twice.

Jemez could now see the *Diablo* close-up through blurry eyes. He appeared even more fearful. A horrible stench of stale sweat, animal grease, and urine emanated from him. The *Diablo* was mouthing something, but it was incomprehensible to the boy. Yet he picked up two familiar sounding words ‘Alejandro’ and ‘Chief Ujarak’. Alejandro was Jemez’s father.

The Indian put the pony in an easy trot. Jemez eyed the Indian with terror-filled eyes. *What plans did the Diablo have for him?* He looked around himself. The surrounding seemed familiar. To his relief, the pony was trotting towards his father’s homestead.His hopes rose. After all, the *Diablo* was not bad as he seemed. Freedom at last*.*

Without a warning Jemez felt himself flung in the air. He landed hard in the dirt and plants. Shock and pain drove through his body. He lay there, stunned, looking up at the fiery sky.

Slowly, the Indian rode into his sight. Jemez lay on the ground, dazed. It took him a moment to realize the Indian was gesticulating wildly at something. The boy stretched towards the direction. To his amazement, his homestead came into sight. It gave him new strength; he arose shaky on his feet. The Indian was still motioning to the house.

Jemez began walking slowly towards the house, keeping an eye on the Indian constantly. The Indian sat unmoving on the pony, glaring at him.

Very subtly the kid increased his gait. Halfway to the gate, he turned and bolted like a frightened rabbit.

The kid’s burst of energy ignited a reaction in the Indian. And he did the most inhuman act.

Just Fear - Part 2